

**SHADOWS NUMBERLESS:
FOUR COLLECTIONS OF
CRITICAL MATERIAL BY
ADAM FIELED**



COMPLETE NOTES AND
BRIEF PIECES ON THE
BRITISH ROMANTICS
2009-2012



Apologia

Criticism of the English Romantics can only be relevant in 2013 to the extent that the English Romantics themselves are relevant in 2013. If they are, especially in America, it is because our material capabilities, in the West, are being threatened with obsolescence—eclipsed, as it were. As such, Romantic conceptions of imagination and the spiritual, both of which chafe against the confines of crass materialism (especially the form which is espoused, both subtly and overtly, in America), are now available as an antidote to the liquidation of material resources. If Marxist modes of thought strain to accommodate the Romantics, newer modes may replace Marxist ones in the Academy. To be blunt: no one who happens to be starving would be wise to remain a devotee of materialism. The Marxist collision with Romanticism takes the sublime and makes it ridiculous. What I am attempting to do here is to give the Romantics some ground back; to discuss them as they would have liked to have been discussed, rather than grounding my assertions in mistrust and smug, perverse, contrived interrogative presumptuousness. That the entire purpose of literary theory is to help us enjoy literature (which is meant, as the Romantics knew, to be enjoyed to begin with) is not lost here; nor is the sense that literary criticism in America has degenerated into a forum for gimmick-hawking hucksters and superficially hard-bitten careerists. The Romantics would not approve of this degradation, and I do not either. For the sake of argument in these pieces, I have joined the diaspora of voices. What will come of this unholy half marriage is yet to be seen.

WORDSWORTH AND DE MAN: SIMILITUDE IN DISSIMILITUDE



On the surface, there seems to be little common thread binding William Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Paul de Man's *Criticism and Crisis*. The contextual circumstances that gave rise to each were radically divergent. Wordsworth was consciously, boldly inaugurating a new movement in British poetics, away from abstraction and impersonality and into the personal, candid, emotional realm that we are now familiar with as that of British Romanticism. His strategy was earnest and direct, his use of language purposeful and linear. Conversely, Paul de Man's *Criticism and Crisis* emerged right in the midst of a Deconstructionist and post-structuralist revolution. The terms of Deconstructionism, as applied to individual writers, necessitated that the "I," the constitutive subject, be subsumed. Rather than start his own counter-revolution, as Wordsworth might have done, de Man took on Deconstructionism on its own terms. There is no "I" in his piece, and the rules of the then *au courant* critical style were closely, carefully followed.

Nevertheless, a close reading of *Criticism and Crisis* reveals that de Man was, in fact, making a purpose-statement, in the manner of Wordsworth. Because convention precluded him from expressing himself in the first person, de Man resorted to a dizzyingly sophisticated use of irony and "mirroring" to make his points. That is, he used similar instances and "subjects" from the history of art and aesthetics to help make his aim clear. His central theme was the idea of the "crisis" as applied to literary criticism. De Man wanted to show that "all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis"(8); in other words, that any new aesthetic reality forces a confrontation between a critic or audience and the innovative, "challenging" work. De Man's piece, as it was a reaction against the new aesthetic theories being touted by trend-hungry Continental critics, is itself also a crisis-statement. It is de Man's ironically rendered representation of a trend-created crisis. Likewise, Wordsworth's purpose-statement can also be seen as a crisis-statement. Wordsworth is not merely inaugurating British Romanticism; he is reacting against the "gaudiness and inane phraseologies"(77) of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. The aesthetic conventions of his era forced this crisis, as the critical conventions of de Man's era forced his.

Purpose-statements are personal; they give an artist or critic a chance to set forth a personal agenda. Crisis-statements are social; they involve the activities of many others, as perceived by the constitutive subject, and of the *Zeitgeist*. Wordsworth and de Man stand united in the impulse to achieve a dual aim; to set forth a personal, purposive agenda, and to frame it in the larger context of a crisis existent around them. For de Man, this dual aim is doubled by a need not only to refute trends, but to question the entire endeavor of literary criticism; Wordsworth, conversely, states his fundamental faith in poetry-as-literary endeavor.

Wordsworth, not constrained by a need to subsume his subjectivity, is able to present his personal agenda mostly unimpeded. He makes a novel claim for his poems and the language found therein; he is using the "real language of men"(76) to describe a universal interiority, how the mind "associates ideas in a state of excitement."(78) Wordsworth never completely defines what "real" language might be, except to associate it with "low and rustic life"(78), which for him signifies purity, lack of social vanity, and freedom from the distractions of urban life. Wordsworth's vision, though it makes claims on universality, is self-created; Wordsworth recognizes this, and his own limitations. His approach to the public display of his vision is cautious and calculated; he states his aim,

which is quite ambitious, humbly; he will gauge the receptivity of the public to the real language of men, and in due course gauge how much pleasure “real language” can impart on receptive minds.

Implicit in Wordsworth’s claims for “real language” is a critique of the then-current modes of poetic production. Wordsworth feels himself surrounded by “deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.”(80) His stance is one of resistance against fashion, rebellion against prevailing trends, and isolation from the mainstream. In other words, once his purpose is stated, and with it his personal agenda, it becomes clear that he is also in the midst of a crisis. His social position is uncertain, and his feeling about his contemporaries ambivalent at best. This ambivalence plays itself out in a shifting discomfort that appears when Wordsworth is forced to address them; he is sometimes willing to lash out, then retreats behind a more even-handed “I do not interfere with their claim, I only wish to prefer a different claim of my own.”(81) Always, the figure of an unseen, assumed reader looms large, and adds at least a modicum of self-consciousness to Wordsworth’s expressed subjectivity. The purely subjective, placed into a social mode of expression, is part and parcel of Wordsworth’s crisis. The purpose, easily stated and developed in solitude, becomes embattled and “crisis-like” when placed into the social context of a published preface.

De Man, unlike Wordsworth, chooses to begin with an explicit acknowledgement of crisis. The piece is titled *Criticism and Crisis*, which gives an indication that it will address salient contemporary issues in criticism. He quickly tells us that “well-established rules and conventions that governed the discipline of criticism...have been so badly tampered with that the entire edifice threatens to collapse.”(3) We are placed squarely within a social context; we do not yet know who is doing the tampering, but it is clearly (we assume) not the work of de Man himself. He presents himself to us, initially, in a reactive mode and stance. Yet it is not a stance, as with Wordsworth, of raw subjectivity; there is no “I” here. We know that a social nexus of critics is being addressed; we know that the situation is designated as “crisis-like”; but we do not get an immediate sense of how de Man posits himself in this scenario. Since use of “I”, in the context of an attempted Deconstructionist or post-structuralist statement, would seem blasphemous, De Man opts to use a “sideways” or “ironic” method to pursue his agenda.

De Man begins with a quote from Mallarme, which he then echoes. Just as Mallarme claimed that his French contemporaries had tampered with the rules of verse, so de Man claims that his Continental contemporaries have tampered with the rules of criticism. As the piece progresses, de Man seems to use Mallarme as a sort of mirror or “double,” a predecessor in an analogous situation. As such, everything that de Man says about Mallarme could equally be applied to de Man. The substantive, purposive element of this comparison occurs when de Man informs us that Mallarme is not really perturbed by what his contemporaries are doing. He “is using them as a screen, a pretext to talk about something that concerns him much more; namely, his own experiments with poetic language.”(7) Likewise, it would seem that de Man’s purpose in *Criticism and Crisis* is not to jump on any bandwagons or even to take sides in a public battle. His purpose is to talk about his own experiments with criticism. He wants to get to the heart of the matter, to address what criticism really consists of and whether it “is a liability or an asset to literary studies as a whole.”(8) What his contemporaries may or may not be doing is a detour, albeit a necessary and unavoidable one. Their battling and bickering

serves to demonstrate what may happen when self-scrutiny becomes lost, and this becomes useful to de Man as a means of representing his purpose.

For both Wordsworth and de Man, historical awareness is paramount. Both take a long view of their respective disciplines, believing that historical awareness adds depth and gravitas to vision. To situate their endeavors in time is part of their purpose, and a lack of historical awareness among their contemporaries is part of the perceived crises. However, each must adopt a different strategy in order to effectively present a historical case for themselves. The pre-Romantic milieu in which Wordsworth was working put an emphasis on the objective, the impersonal. For Wordsworth to break through this wall, he had to adopt what was then an unconventional strategy. He dared to be personal, thus inaugurating a new era. Conversely, de Man conformed to the anti-subjectivist standards that surrounded post-structuralist discourse. Only then was he able to make his points in such a way that they would be listened to, possibly heeded. De Man's submission to the trends of his day, however, were merely apparent. Through the use of irony, and through the indirect use of himself as constitutive subject, he was able to historicize himself, his purpose of self-scrutiny and the crises both within his own consciousness and without.

Within his piece, De Man, unlike Wordsworth, is willing to stoop to self-contradiction. First he tells us that the entire critical edifice may be collapsing, owing to conflicts on the Continent. Then he remarks that "we have some difficulty taking seriously the polemical violence with which methodological issues are being debated in Paris."⁽⁵⁾ So, almost immediately there is a sense, within this contradiction, that de Man is being subversive, and that his seeming dismay at his contemporaries' flightiness is intended ironically. He is indulging in self-contradiction in order to achieve his purpose, part of which may be to put the Continental critics in their place. Indeed, he tells us that the authority of the best historians can be invoked to show that "what was considered a crisis in the past often turns out to be a mere ripple."⁽⁶⁾ De Man's view of history, as seen in this piece, is cyclical. It is not that changes do not transpire; it is that they transpire slowly and almost invisibly. Thus, part of the crisis he is rebelling against is an attitude of shallow, ill-considered fickleness. It turns out that De Man's crisis-statement is two-pronged; he castigates literary poseurs for their lack of historical awareness, even as he notes that the utility of literary criticism has not been proven conclusively. The first crisis applies to him, as an outsider looking in; the second is generally operative, and it applies to him directly. Just as Wordsworth makes universal claims for the utility of poetry, de Man makes universal claims *against* the utility of criticism, or shows that its utility must be proven and scrutinized.

On this level, it is interesting to note that the analogues de Man chooses to act as his shadows or doubles are not critics; Mallarmé is a poet, Husserl a philosopher, Levi-Strauss, a structural anthropologist. Further, it is remarkable to note that not once in *Criticism and Crisis* does de Man mention one of the Continental critics whom he is taking to task. He mentions Sartre, Poulet, Starabinski, stars of an earlier era; but those who have created the seeming crisis that de Man is addressing remain unnamed (just as de Man, himself, does.) This returns to the fact that de Man is naming a crisis that exists to him only ostensibly. The more profound crisis is whether criticism, once scrutinized, retains any meaning. Historicity becomes a method whereby de Man, rather than making claims for criticism, sees the cycle of crises and purposes that defines any kind of literary

creation. The final question as to the ultimate validity or non-validity of criticism is never addressed directly, but merely suggested. This suggestion constitutes a substantial part of de Man's purpose, just as his contemporaries neglect of the question forms part of the crisis.

Wordsworth's approach to historicity, like most angles of his approach, is more direct, less convoluted than de Man's. Wordsworth is a poet, concerned with poetry; when he looks for analogues, in the context of a discussion of metrical language, he thinks of "the age of Catullus, Terence, and Lucretius, and that of Statius or Claudian; and in our own country, in the age of Shakespeare and Beaumont and Fletcher, and that of Donne and Cowley, or Dryden, or Pope." (77) What we have here is a variety of implicit assumptions, none of which can be found in de Man. Wordsworth seemingly believes that poetry is an art-form valid both through history and in his present; that there is a stable canon of great work that can be relied upon unquestioningly; that knowledge of this canon is essential; and that Wordsworth, himself, is going to attempt to join the ranks of canonized, historically important poets. Wordsworth's tremendous advantage over de Man, in making a purpose-statement, is that he does not have to resort to subversion, irony, and self-contradiction. On the other hand, his straightforward subjectivity leaves him open to accusations of pomposity and complacency.

There is, in fact, a note of complacency running through Wordsworth's preface. He idealizes the poet as a being "endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind." (81) This attitude aids and abets Wordsworth in delivering the purposive element of his preface; he believes in the "poet", as an idealized figure, in the same manner that he believes in "poetry". Thus, he seems to suffer comparatively little cognitive dissonance regarding his agenda, and his ability to express himself and his purpose. His faith in the "inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind" (80) gives his address assurance, and his tone rarely wavers from this measured, assured calm. When "crisis" issues arise, i.e. when Wordsworth mentions his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, he does not slip into another register, but maintains a dignified, even keel. We are able to infer from this that if a "battle" of sorts should take place for domination of British poetics, Wordsworth is confident of victory. Wordsworth sees a crisis all around him, and is able to name the crisis, and talk of how it must be overcome, but it does not seem to concern him overmuch. His tone is that of an already privately established eminence waiting to be crowned with justly-earned laurel. He sees his isolation as a temporary condition and waits without haste for the world to come to him.

Circumstances, of course, proved Wordsworth to be correct. His eminence grew to be widely recognized, he was eventually made laureate, his avowed purpose was embraced by many poets, and the poetic crisis of "false refinement" and "arbitrary innovation" (79) resolved itself in the birth of British Romanticism. Consequently, a certain amount of complacency might have been justified. However, it could be argued that a lack of rigor makes many of Wordsworth's claims untenable. Coleridge, for example, was disturbed by Wordsworth's claim to the "real language of men", "real language" not being definable or discussable by any objective measure. Such claims formed an essential part of Wordsworth's purpose— to stake a claim for poetry as universal truth, "carried alive into the heart by passion." (82) The sort of rigorous and

unstinting self-scrutiny advocated by de Man is not part of Wordsworth's agenda. It may be that, as this preface was not his idea, but that of his friends who "advised me to prefix a systematic defense"(76), he did not feel the need to question himself, as he might have were it a poem.

De Man, unburdened (at least on the surface) with complacency or egotism, makes no claims for criticism, universal or personal. His purpose, discernible beneath the twists, turns, ironies and meta-ironies, is to stake a claim for self-scrutiny, on all levels. Following in the footsteps of Mallarme, who is seen to be "ironical"(16), de Man suggests that the act of writing must question itself at every turn; "all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis."(8) Yet, de Man takes another detour, to an unlikely destination. He uses a lecture by Husserl to demonstrate that "the rhetoric of crisis states its own truth in the mode of error."(16) Though never explicitly stated, we can use these two statements to make an inductive leap; if all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis, and if the rhetoric of crisis states its own truth in the mode of error, then all true (and rhetorically based) criticism must be erroneous! It must be noted that this inductive leap is never made by de Man himself. It is left in wait for the attentive reader. The irony is that this passionate plea for self-scrutiny in criticism should suggest (albeit indirectly) that criticism, once scrutinized, may lose all meaning.

Had Wordsworth wanted to make this point, he would have spelled it out explicitly. However, the context that de Man is working in precludes him from doing this. For the Deconstructionists, Romanticism, of which Wordsworth is so salient a representative, was the enemy. Any hint of egotism or complacency would be pounced upon and used to discredit the subject. Yet, it was clearly de Man's intention to make this point, by whatever means available. He notes that "in the language of polemics the crooked path often travels faster than the straight one."(14) This must, of necessity, be the path he takes. Because it is not stated overtly, de Man must hope that his audience is subtle enough to catch the purpose behind his twists and turns. Likewise, de Man must hope that his enemies, those who have created the crisis we encounter at the beginning of the piece, and who are never openly named, will appreciate the self-scrutiny that has led de Man to his rigorous conclusion; that nothing in literature can be taken for granted, and that literature itself might be a kind of nothingness.

Here, we have two apparently simple designations: Wordsworth, the Romantic egotist, spelling out a personal purpose and reacting to crisis in a personal way; de Man, the objective Deconstructionist, subsuming subjectivity both in stating a purpose and reacting to a crisis. However, beneath the surface, things may not be so simple. Wordsworth, reacting as he is against objective modes of creation that (he feels) have grown stale, is using bare subjectivity to spell out a new vision. Subjectivity becomes the most attractive expedient, the shortest distance between what was and what may be. It is being purposefully used, and with self-consciousness. Complacency creeps in specifically because Wordsworth knows himself to be doing something original. Had Wordsworth's "I" been subsumed, his entire construct would collapse, and he would not be making an original statement. His crisis would remain untouched, his purpose unstated. In the contextual framework of early nineteenth century Britain, nothing could have been more revolutionary or revelatory than a lone, rebellious "I" taking a bold stand against trends that had prevailed for decades.

Likewise, De Man's lack of subjectivity, his apparent objectivity, is a carefully

crafted illusion. De Man speaks of using the language of polemics, because *Criticism and Crisis* is polemical. It is a personal statement based on a subjective experience, both of criticism as a personal, purposive endeavor, and of criticism as it exists in de Man's social milieu. This milieu is being dogged by crisis, and a crisis (of false refinement and arbitrary innovation) that closely resembles the one that Wordsworth is enumerating in his preface. Because de Man is not self-consciously inaugurating a new era but reacting against one, his strategy seems to be to outdo the Continental critics at their own game. His "I" is so cleverly concealed that, far from seeming like a "privileged consciousness"(9), it seems evanescent. Yet multiple re-readings of *Criticism and Crisis* reveal an "I" that is fluid, mercurial, and capable both of enumerating a two-pronged crisis (the fickleness of Continental critics and the uncertainty of criticism as a discipline) and stating a two-pronged purpose (to show that fickleness in criticism is fruitless and to show equally the need for continued self-scrutiny).

In a way, de Man's circuitous technique could be seen as even more egotistical than Wordsworth's. There is an element of "dazzle" to de Man's performance that is lacking in Wordsworth. De Man demonstrates that he can use irony, "mirroring," and deliberate self-contradiction to craft a statement that is as essentially personal as Wordsworth's preface. He is beating the Continental critics at their own "unprivileged" game, demystifying them in such a way that at no point does he reveal himself as the dreaded, Romantic subject. Yet every point he makes moves forward the argument that it is not the Romantic subject to be guarded against, but a contradictory awareness of literature as a "something that is really nothing". De Man might choose to designate literature as a "nothing that may or may not be something".

There does remain one fundamental discrepancy between Wordsworth and de Man: their attitude towards language itself. This discrepancy was largely determined by the eras in which they lived; Wordsworth, right at the dawn of Romanticism, had no notion of words as arbitrary signs, nor that the connection between thing and word, signified and signifier, might be flawed or, worse, non-existent. When Wordsworth addresses language itself, he does so in such a way to reinforce the impression that he believes words are capable of "pure" signification. Wordsworth mentions "in what manner language and the human mind act and react on each other"(76-77), in the context of a complaint as to the general taste of the British public. We do not see Wordsworth questioning the inherent value of linguistic signification; we see him questioning the uses to which linguistic signification can be put. If language is seen to be stable, reliable, and just to the expressive intent of the human subject, then an attitude of confident self-righteousness would seem to be, if not admirable, at least understandable. Wordsworth does not doubt that he can make clear his purposive agenda, nor that he can spell out the crisis in British taste as he sees it. His trust in language, and in his own expressive capacities, seems secure. For Wordsworth, language may be purified and simplified by a retreat into rural simplicity; the language of rural people "is adopted...because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived."(78) Rather than admit of fundamental duplicities or confusions, Wordsworth advocates reducing language to its barest essentials. Here, there is likely to be less static between sign and meaning, less needless ornamentation. This simplification of language forms part of Wordsworth's purpose, just as the ornate, "gaudy" language of his predecessors forms part of the perceived crisis he is

counteracting. Once simplified, language need not be scrutinized. This bedrock belief in the power and reliability of signification is part of what allows Wordsworth to be so straightforward. Purpose and crisis can be equally addressed, an even keel may be maintained, and faith in the ultimate triumph of truth and nature (both, in this context, assumed universals) are demonstrated. Wordsworth enacts the discourse of the privileged subject, making a singular claim for his finite notions of truth, in precisely the manner that de Man eschews.

For de Man, things *must* be more complicated. In the post-Saussurian era, faith in language, even simplified language, had been drastically reduced. The arbitrary quality of the linguistic sign had become a guiding precept for both Structuralism and Deconstructionism. De Man works with the knowledge that every discourse falls prey to “the duplicity, the confusion, and the untruth that we take for granted in the everyday use of language.”(9) The kind of self-scrutiny that de Man is advocating would seem to preclude the confident vigor of Wordsworth’s tone and literary demeanor. De Man’s complete awareness, both of his own situation as a contemporary critic and of the situation of his Continental colleagues, allows him room to maneuver, to use the trends and tenor of his times to make a personal claim on, if not universal truth, at least enduring value. Whether there is a direct correlation between universal truth (the legitimacy of which took a beating, alongside linguistic signage, as the Structuralist movement developed) and enduring value is not, for de Man, the point. What de Man is demonstrating, with just as much confidence and vigor as Wordsworth (though sans the “I”, and the directness that it lends), is that certain situations and circumstances tend to repeat themselves, that trends pass, and that the self-scrutiny which “scrutinize(s) itself to the point of reflecting on its own origin”(7) has a value. De Man does not posit this value as universal; he does not need to. The very fact of Mallarme’s speech to an English audience at Oxford in 1894, the nature of Mallarme’s ironies, his twists, turns, and ability to turn trends and fickleness to his own ends in a sort of charade, show de Man (and, by implication, his readers) that Nietzsche’s “eternal return” might apply to aesthetics as to all other things. The end of Mallarme’s charade is adopted by de Man; to sneak “enduring value” (for want of a better, less authoritative sounding term) in through the back door, via irony. Through adopting Mallarme’s stance, de Man gets to have his cake and eat it too; he makes a personal purpose-statement without ever using the first person, while revealing a seeming crisis to be a trifle (and one with many antecedents in the history of literature.) Mallarme becomes a Virgil figure (albeit a highly ironical one), leading de Man through the dark wood of conflict, into the open air of disciplined thought.

As this “air of disciplined thought” entails a fundamental ambivalence or uncertainty towards de Man’s chosen discipline, this metaphor might be misleading. Better, perhaps, to say that de Man’s “Mallarmean mask” allows him to tell the truth (or, at least, his version of the truth). Wordsworth does not feel compelled to wear a mask. His only artifice involves the use of rhetoric to make his perceived crisis clear and his purpose known. His famous “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”(79) seems more rhetorical than reality based. “All”, in this context, universalizes a sentiment that, in its time, might have seemed shocking. It would be difficult to imagine *Paradise Lost* as a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”, or *The Rape of the Lock*. Wordsworth exaggerates the aspects of his argument that make

him seem singular, atomized, and extraordinary. The exaggerations are subtle, but they color the entire enterprise of the preface.

Perhaps this is the essential similarity between Wordsworth and de Man, as reflected in these two pieces: both feel the need to make calculated overstatements. De Man's "all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis" is mirrored by Wordsworth's "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." These two pieces are joined, not only by the need to assert a purpose and a crisis, but by the ambition to be bold, to "think big." These are pieces written to be read. They demonstrate a keen awareness of an assumed audience, and both display a sense of intellectual showmanship, a certain "bravura" quality. These two figures, writing to such different ends and audiences in such radically dissimilar eras, are showing us (one through earnestness, one through irony) how a literary gauntlet might be laid down. Judging by the intense reaction these pieces received, De Man and Wordsworth both succeeded at meeting their divergent, contradictory, but not entirely dissimilar goals.

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NOTES AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS:
WORDSWORTH'S "PRELUDE" AND LORD
BYRON'S "DON JUAN"



Jerome McGann emphasizes the fact that *Don Juan* is more about “contexts” than *Prelude* is. He stresses the social aspect of Byron’s mock-epic, set against Wordsworth’s “egotistical sublime.” However, I would argue that there is ample evidence within *The Prelude* that not only was Wordsworth aware of social context, it plays a role that is almost equally large to the role that it plays in *Don Juan*. The central difference between the two epics is fundamental, and obvious: *Don Juan* is partly about a character that (unlike Childe Harold) is definitively *not* Byron, while *The Prelude* is definitively, on most levels, about Wordsworth. We see, in *Don Juan*, Byron labors to make situations and contexts *around* Don Juan interesting, while Wordsworth must labor to make his interiority interesting (though Wordsworth presents some situations and contexts as well). Yet a look at social contexts (some included, some excluded) in *The Prelude* will demonstrate that even amidst all the earnestness, Wordsworth has a sense of himself as an actor upon a stage. While it would be hard going to see a “masquerade” element in *The Prelude* (and McGann emphasizes the “masquerade” aspect of *Don Juan*), there is a sense that the one aspect that resides behind Wordsworth’s binds, Wordsworth-as-text-creator, enables Wordsworth to deliberately introduce stories, the contexts they create, and how they might change our opinion of the protagonist (him). Likewise, it is important to balance out McGann’s equation by asserting the obtrusiveness of Byron’s presence in *Don Juan*. The Byron that is a “ghost presence” (both in the poem and in his binding processes) is static: he is flippant, insouciant, irreverent, and digressive from start to finish. *The Prelude*, on the other hand, is a kind of Bildungsroman, and the point is to watch Wordsworth change, grow, develop, consummate his mind (and, I will argue, his body). So that the constant shifts McGann sees in *Don Juan* are equally present in *The Prelude*, but the poles are reversed: *Don Juan* features change up-front and stasis beneath (or as a “ghost presence”), while *The Prelude* exists with a static surface and a flux beneath.

From a critical perspective, it might be most interesting to apply this “reversal principle” to the story of Julia and Vaudracour (Book IX). Here is a story that reflects issues of the body, sexuality, and loss. Because Wordsworth elides his own affair with Annette Villon (and the child it produced) almost entirely from *The Prelude*, this story has a kind of “double resonance.” It is also one of the few places in *The Prelude* where sexual intercourse (Byron’s favored motif in *Don Juan*) is directly alluded to. Wordsworth goes out of his way to make the pair seem innocent; yet they are having unprotected sex, which is, in this context (a forbidden affair) risky indeed. This story demonstrates (as *Don Juan* does over and over again) that pleasures often lead to pain, that sexuality is the source of great sorrows, and that this is created by its eruption in contexts in which it is forbidden or discouraged. This is the story in *The Prelude* that relates most closely to *Don Juan*; and it is told tenderly, rather than archly. Looking back, we can see it as Wordsworth telling this part of his own story in indirect terms. It also demonstrates how carefully Wordsworth labored to create a textual self that was seldom directly culpable. Just as Levinson saw “Tintern Abbey” and “Ode” as displacements away from radical despair/disappointment, I see this episode as Wordsworth’s displacement away from *sexual* disappointment. Vaudracour’s nobility is Wordsworth’s displaced; the history of Vaudracour and Julia does not mimic that of Wordsworth’s and Annette Villon’s, but is close enough (in its tragic context) to warrant the displacement tag. So, Wordsworth does get in a bit of masquerade, but (unlike in Byron), it does not advertise itself *as* masquerade. Wordsworth’s essential earnestness is intact, and the form in which the tale is told (a kind of retrospective reverie) ensures that the audience’s labor will not involve fingers being pointed back at Wordsworth. The Wordsworth protagonist must be painted in a certain way and from a certain angle; otherwise, the “bargain” element of the text will be taken away and the audience will have too much work to do. Mysteries must be presented;

but they must present a contrast to Keats and Negative Capability (though of course neither Keats nor Negative Capability could have been a direct influence on Wordsworth) by ample and instructive explanation. This central displacement (and others, like Wordsworth in Milton's room) needs to be explored.

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Jonathon Shears notes in *Byron's Aposiopesis* that Byron uses the literary device aposiopesis (sudden breaks in a character or narrator's speech) to encourage reader participation. Shears writes, "Aposiopesis creates a role for the reader as actor central to the establishment of reading" (187) This positing brings to mind Wolfgang Iser's Reader Response theory, which Iser applied to prose fiction, but might just as easily be tied to epic poems. I believe this true because epic poems, like prose fiction, work on a large scale, with an extended architecture and narrative structure in mind (even, as in *Don Juan*, when this structure is deliberately ad hoc and digressive). Wordsworth rarely uses aposiopesis, and I believe that the lack of this device in *The Prelude* signals a key difference between Wordsworth and Byron's respective approaches, if one parses them like this: Wordsworth's systematic application of principles determines that his approach must be as unitary as possible. Aposiopesis is a breaking-of-unity; it signals a place in which the reader is induced to exert effort to understand. Because Byron is rebelling against Wordsworth's unitary pretensions (and the deliberate elisions this necessitates), it suits his purposes to use aposiopesis to create an ambience of candor and humanity. In fact, it is a central irony to the comparison of these two epics that both Wordsworth and Byron believe they are more candid and more humane than the other. Nevertheless, Byron's usage of aposiopesis (and Wordsworth's elision of same) gives a key to understanding how a reader is induced to respond and create meaning within the confines of these two poems. A sudden breakage represents an event that can be interpreted as artificial or organic— text is inherently artificial, but breakages are part of the texture of lived existence. When we come across aposiopesis in *Don Juan*, we are led to believe that Byron is reinforcing one of his central conceits— that this is an oral epic, which replicates Byron's actual voice. Byron is toying with (or, as John Lauber might say, destroying) epic conventions. The central question is: is aposiopesis part of Byron's labor (i.e. something calculated to induce an effect in the reader) or is it part of his improvisatory style? Since Byron was loathe to credit himself with any labor whatsoever where poetry (even epic poetry) was concerned, it seems safest to guess that Byron includes these interruptions as they occur to him. However, this can be taken as a sort of giving in to the immediacy that McGann sees in him; he labors not to check his impulses, but to give in to them, to deliberately not censor himself, to (as the modern colloquialism runs) go with the flow.

For the reader, this means a ride less monotonous, but significantly rougher, than one finds in *The Prelude*. Byron's episodic impulses, however, assure that the serious reader of *Don Juan* (and Byron might bridle at such a notion) has significantly less work to do (but also, possibly, less to attain) than the reader of *The Prelude*. We collaborate (using Iser's term) with Byron by following his voice, rather than learning his system; our labor is rewarded in the immediacy of authentic breaths. Wordsworth's lack of aposiopesis raises chances that immediate enjoyments (and illusions, however convincing, of immediacy) be sacrificed for an ultimately larger gain, which encompasses a broader, more ideal vision of humanity than is offered by Byron. The serious reader of *The Prelude* must submit to Wordsworth's monotonous (perhaps mountainous) surfaces, in order to gain the stunning epiphany of

Snowdon. The reader's labor seems to be one of wise passivity and restraint: trusting Wordsworth to lead us to a secure, worthwhile destination. The labor Byron imposes is less demanding; to listen closely to individual moments, to glean a sense of frothy enjoyment from each. Byron rejects the idea that either he or his audience should significantly labor; it is the labor *not* to labor, the manifestation of an aesthetic of irresponsibility. Byron uses aposiopesis to such an extent that it becomes a mannerism, a token of his roguish wit. Yet Byron's anti-labor is labor nonetheless; he forces himself to be as lively as possible, to create as many memorable moments as he can. Wordsworth's plan tends to defer the momentary.

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J. Michael Robertson points out Byron's "aristocratic individualism" and how it "doubly-elevates" Byron: elevated (class-wise) by birth and experience, also elevated (by talent and insight) *above* his birth and experience. Robertson points out that Byron "frequently belittles the act of composition even as he composes" (643). Yet I want to complicate this by placing them in relation to Byron's methods of binding. I would argue that Byron is always in the process of "doubling himself"—it is one way of refuting Wordsworth's unitary presentation and Coleridge's theories of organic unity. He must, of necessity, present himself as both himself and not-himself—engaged in a work of great labor, and above labor (or maybe even, in a certain sense, beneath it.) Since, as Robertson points out, Byron's massive audience was massively enticed by his aristocratic disdain, Byron's "doubling" and disdain for labor cannot be taken at face value. Rather, passages that demonstrate this can be parsed as Byron recreating a textual image that has brought him fame and fortune (which, monetarily, he refused to accept), and this kind of "image maintenance" is a key to understanding *Don Juan*. But any kind of maintenance is a kind of labor, and Byron works to consolidate the image he has established in *Childe Harold* and his earlier works. He belittles partly because his audience *wants* him to belittle; he is saving them the work of dealing with a new Byron. Because *Don Juan* is the protagonist, it seems like Byron, in the context of this epic, has no need for self-recreation. The split between himself and his protagonist creates doubling enough; his labor is to entertain by an unpredictable textual juggling act. There is little in Byron's self-presentation here that is not stylized; belittling the act of composition is a characteristic gesture that enhances the stylistic flair of the representation. I buy Robertson's claim for Byron as an "aristocratic individualist": but I would opt to see this something already more or less perfected before *Don Juan* was even begun. Byron does not suddenly become what Robertson sees him as: it has been part of his repertoire for many years at this point. Because this image is (or can be taken as) a rebellion against the Lakers, it also involves Byron in a kind of class warfare: Wordsworth's elevation is etherealized, rather than material, and not meant to entice but to reform and give wholesome nourishment to middle-class readers. Yet, Byron reached a wider, more appreciative audience with his more spectacular form of self-image dissemination.

To expand Robertson's thesis, I would opine that Wordsworth presents himself as a spiritual aristocrat, and a spiritual individualist. All the material manifestations of wealth and importance are too low (to be crude) for Wordsworth even to spit on; the center of his investigation is the pursuit of a unitary self, unitary mind, and a similarly unitary text fit for middle-class consumption. The idea of "unitary realities" may be seen as a middle-class one; "doubling," multiplication of selves, involves a consciousness that destabilizes necessity; Byron has the time, leisure, freedom, and resources to be more than one person. Material exigencies (though they are elided from Wordsworth's self-presentation *The Prelude*) force the

middle-class consciousness into knowledge of limitations, boundaries, and the imperative of purpose. Middle-class ethos instills rigor, discipline, and single-minded determination for this reason. Wordsworth's individualism is the middle-class kind: disciplined, stringent, singular. Byron emphasizes leisure by refuting these notions. Yet it is worth looking into just how similar these two forms of individualism are: material and spiritual, aristocratic and bourgeois. Both are predicated on having, at the very least, enough material goods for subsistence. Both are predicated on leisure, with one central difference between Byron and Wordsworth: Wordsworth feels guilty, Byron is shameless. Wordsworth *needs* to demonstrate middle-class virtue in his labor; his textual self is made to be representative. However, unlike Robertson, I believe that Byron has a *compelling need* (rather than just an off-hand desire) to responsibly (thinking of his audience's pleasure) deliver aristocratic irresponsibility. They are flip sides of the same coin.

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It seems to me that Marjorie Levinson's reading of "Michael" makes Michael himself a precursor to Wordsworth, as he appears as text-creator (creator of binds) in *The Prelude*. Wordsworth, as text-creator, makes his flock the whole horde of experiences and sensory impressions that he uses to craft both himself-as-protagonist and a unitary vision of why this created self is important. The difference is that, in the course of "Michael," the protagonist loses, and goes from successful consummations of lived experience to unsuccessful ones, while Wordsworth-as-protagonist "gains" by consummating his mind and leading himself carefully to a place and a context in which he can express himself effectively. Wordsworth as text-creator is, in a sense, "subsistence farming," because he is not creating anything, is using only what has happened to him to create organic unity. Thus, the use value of what he has experienced gains an exchange value when attached to the other two links: textual production and the (eventual) public appearance of a "priceless" commodity. It is because Wordsworth identifies with Michael that the purity of Michael's interaction with natural elements mirrors (or, Wordsworth would want it to mirror) Wordsworth's textual approach in *The Prelude*. So Michael is both a prefiguring type and more material manifestation of the "middle Wordsworth" that stands between his represented self and a middle class public. If there is a loss, it is that, just as Michael "loses" Luke into an urban arena (which swallows him), Wordsworth "loses" his text to a realm of (urban) commodities. That *The Prelude* was not published until Wordsworth dies softens the blow, but also parallels Michael's advanced age. Levinson points out that Michael equates labor with pleasure: they are an undivided, unitary reality for him. In Wordsworth's conception of *The Prelude*, this also holds; Wordsworth never complains that writing *The Prelude* is not easy for him, though the work does show Wordsworth as protagonist in pain, dealing with cognitive dissonance. Yet, because the work promises and delivers consummation, we see a successful "marriage" between both the mind of Man and Nature, Man and Community, and Man and textual presentation thereof. Middle Wordsworth clearly takes pleasure in what he is creating, is convinced of its worthiness and use value for an audience that is willing to labor along with him. If the issue of "exchange value" is uncomfortable, it may be ameliorated by the fact that Wordsworth never lived to see this happen (at least on the level that followed from the dissemination of *The Prelude*). Levinson also points out the process by which, just as Michael does, Wordsworth works through raw materials, "processes" them, delivers them to a largely urban audience who can use it to purify and "compensate" themselves. For audience as for

Wordsworth, labor is seen to be an act of pleasure, fulfillment, and love. The work that Wordsworth asks us to do is work that should be labor, but should not necessarily, at all times, *feel* like labor.

Of course, much about Michael, and the middle Wordsworth that he prefigures, is antithetical to Byron's self-presentation, the middle Byron and *Don Juan* as protagonist. Rather than merely "subsistence farm" from what he has already known and experienced, Byron spins a wild weave of imagined experience (and imagined, not from Nature, but out of thin air), indirect recollections (which put his raw materials, which are plainly visible in *The Prelude*, out of the audience's sight), snarky digressions (which are "subsistence" material, but more like weeds and stubble than sheep), and anti-philosophical sophistries, all of which deflect attention from whatever is his construct is earnest and wholesomely good. Yet, there is a refining process going on here, and the very care Byron takes to maintain an insouciant façade is evidence of being engaged in the same process Wordsworth is. Perhaps Byron is just a different *kind* of farmer than Wordsworth and Michael; his work *is* humble, and the sense that he knows what his audience wants (the mythical Byronic virtues of charm, darkness, sensuality) and is laboring to give it to them. It is just that, unlike Michael and Wordsworth, part of Byron's "farming" involves hiding his tracks, making the "farm" he works on as evanescent as possible (and making it seem like there is no farm whatsoever). So Byron *does*, in fact, wind up being presaged by Michael, not to the extent that Wordsworth is, but to significant extent nonetheless. Since the standard Byronic topoi were all in place before *Don Juan*, Byron's subsistence depends on extending them. His need to deflect attention from this process, in a sense makes Byron's method of cultivating his materials more demanding than Wordsworth's or Michael's, with the added weight of feeling compelled to satisfy a large public (which Wordsworth did not need to worry about). Byron's readers have to work less hard than Wordsworth's do; but Byron's alchemical process of text-creation involved much more backtracking, careful placements of "hints," and disappearing acts than Wordsworth's did. Byron actually has far more of a "flock" than Wordsworth; the text as his Luke will almost certainly not disappear, but will occupy a significant public space.

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There are reasons to write about *Don Juan* and *The Prelude* now that are particular to the present moment. I think that teaching these two epics can be more instructive and more entertaining (if more time-consuming) than teaching shorter pieces because of their connection to two modern realities: the cinema and the Internet. The history of the production of Byron's epic is particularly suitable and relevant, because, as is shown in St. Clair's book, Byron took steps to ensure that his epic would be available to the widest possible audience. By allowing pirated editions to proliferate (owing in part to the government's refusal to grant him intellectual property rights), Byron made a gesture that was as egalitarian as his poetry was aristocratic. Thus, Robertson's charge of "aristocratic individualism" is, to some extent, refuted by Byron's (anti) business sense, and his business sense does, in fact, seem to be as "anti" as his epic impulses. This is pertinent because it shows a clear line being drawn between different ends of Byron's binds: the text creator, who fashions an aristocratic textual self, and what work the audience is expected to do. How that audience acquires the text counts here; and again, the situation arranged itself in such a manner that very little work (other than pleasurable reading) needed to be done by Byron's

audience. An argument could be made that Byron's digressions would tax an audience's intentions, but that does not refute the intimation, shown by the material and economic modes of production of *Don Juan*, that Byron did in fact *care deeply* about his audience, and that he was eager for his work to be read and disseminated among all classes of people. In short, the Byron who *manages* his work appears substantially different than the Byron who appears *in* his work. There is a modern-day poetry equivalent: poets who chose who disseminate their work online guarantee that a potentially wide (not entirely class-bound or cash-bound) audience might be reached. If Byron were alive now, we might see him place the entirety of *Don Juan* online, to go with pricey print editions. Pirated editions in early 19th century England and online publishing in the early 21st century have much in common—high numbers of readers, velocity of responses, subversive potential, and a generalized egalitarianism. Byron was far ahead of his time, and he was richly rewarded: *Don Juan* became the most widely read long poem of the 19th century. The discrepancy between the “middle Byron” of his text and the egalitarian, non-materialistic businessman (excuse the oxymoron), that is relevant and parallel, in some senses, to contemporary poetry dissemination, needs to be investigated. It heightens the impression that *Don Juan* was a labored-over construction, meant both to provoke and to please, to be attractive and to repulse, and Byron was the puppet-master, not only of *Don Juan* but of himself, as he appears in his text. To be short, Byron was a far less pessimistic, more forward-thinking, and (ultimately) more compassionate presence than he was given credit for. Maybe the egalitarian, compassionate Byron was displaced out of *Don Juan*, maybe not, but Byron's actions in perpetuating the consumption of his work were, at best, classless and selfless.

Both *Don Juan* and *The Prelude* can be taught as “cinematic”: they have elements of scene, character, encounter, dialogue, and mise en scene that link them to our modern (and postmodern) cultural heritage. While there is pungent irony in the fact that a textual Wordsworth who goes out of his way to appear egalitarian actually takes a sinecure position as Distributor of Stamps (enforcing policies of censorship), *The Prelude* has scenes that can be enjoyed not only in imagination's labor, but also as imaginative ends in themselves. That is, Wordsworth's audience must choose how much labor they wish to exert to consummate their minds. If they choose a lower level of appreciation, they can merely “enjoy the scenery” the way one would a beautiful movie today. Not that movies do not have potentiality to consummate minds; just that it is important to note two things: that Wordsworth could not compel his audience to exert the kind of labor that he might wish them too, and that this also applies to modern readers of *The Prelude* (particularly students), who might choose to see it as a movie, rather than buying in so completely to Wordsworth's ethos that there is commensurate tightness between all the links of his binds. Byron's binds are loose, meant to be loose, so that labor feels like pleasure; this includes the labor of finding and purchasing the poem. Wordsworth is much more convoluted, forcing readers to deal with his material absence (he is dead when the poem comes out), insistence on unitary presentation (which necessitates displacements, elisions, and complications that Wordsworth is aware of), veneer of absolute self-confidence (Wordsworth has absolute belief, or wants to appear to have absolute belief, that his mind has been consummated), and reliance on a relationship with nature (intercourse) with nature that is his presumed stronghold. To master all these levels of labor, one must have faith in Wordsworth's vision; to find a wide audience to submit to such an austere faith would seem to be impossible. What I argue for is a lesser level of dedication, a *comfortable* level of labor, which would approach *The Prelude* more like an audience might approach a movie today: as the vision of, say, a Kubrick or a Scorsese, not to be accepted uncritically (as Wordsworth might have wished), but to be analyzed objectively. Thus, there

is a much greater discrepancy between what Wordsworth wanted and what he got and what Byron wanted and got with his epic; Byron was more realistic about his audience's needs, and was rewarded with much greater popular recognition. Conversely, does that mean that Byron was *pandering*? That is certainly what Wordsworth seems to have thought.

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David Simpson presents the thesis that WW's encounters with what Hartman calls "boundary figures" are in fact encounters with specters, who can be taken to represent a kind of "death-in life." However, I would see that Simpson generalizes too much and that this cannot be taken as an axiom where WW, and especially the PL, are concerned. There is ample evidence that WW's encounters in PL involve more than just "death-in-life." The primary example I would use to argue against Simpson's thesis is the beggar WW encounters in London. What WW sees in the beggar is manifestly not "death-in-life," but the inscrutability and impenetrability of "other worlds." What would constitute these "other worlds," and how does the acknowledgement of them affect the Labor Chain? While Simpson claims that the "other worlds" are shadow worlds, of half-existence and death, I would say that the beggar could just as easily be taken (Bk 7) to represent the otherworldliness of a kind of heaven—a place of repose, dignity, and cessation of desire. Simpson's interpretation is equally valid, but needs to be balanced by this possibility. As with the wandering soldier, it is left to the audience to do the labor of figuring for themselves if these liminal/boundary figures represent a kind of hell (ghostliness) or a kind of heaven (freedom from care, worry, desire), or both. Simpson counts as evidence the fact that these figures are materially destitute, and thus force both WW and his audience to labor through middle-class guilt. Lack of material substance and sustenance turn them into ghosts, half-people. However, it seems to me that Simpson's interpretation is more a working through the labor of his own middle-class guilt, and that these figures are far more well-rounded (in their liminal way) than Simpson would have us believe. They are destitute, but they manifest extreme dignity; they are silent or almost silent, but they do not complain; they inhabit no "home" or stable niche in society, but they do not unduly take from anyone else. Their reliance on charity could be taken two ways: negatively, as a manifestation of insubstantiality; positively, as a willingness not to encroach, steal, or go in for the unproductive labor of the lumpenproletariat. Their striking appearances (especially the soldier's) make them very much alive, perceptible, and real to WW-as-protagonist. Are they, as Simpson claims, "spooky"? It is conventionally thought that spooky things scare us without being edifying. Since these boundary figures are so edifying, and since these encounters clearly took on great significance to WW as protagonist (and text creator), I would say that "spooky" is an inadequate and quite reductive epithet to pin on these figures. They would only be spectral to a crassly materialist consciousness, and WW is hardly crassly materialistic.

There is equally little "ghostliness" in DJ; DJ's encounters, in fact, have the opposite effect, of being so material that they border on ribaldry. If there is something spooky about DJ, it is in LB's appearance in the text; how, woven through the narrative, he appears and disappears. It is also, not spooky, but ambiguous to what extent LB is calculating the effects of his ribaldry. The early Cantos of DJ were harshly received; what allowed LB to persevere? LB's encounters, as represented in DJ, show us a man reckoning crass materialism and its emptiness, whether as applied to the haut monde or to hacks like Bob Southey. Yet, of course, LB's sensibility is tempered by the conceit that his life as a public figure (and in every

other material way) is over. LB makes *himself* into a ghost, a mere shadow of the public self he used to be. He implicates himself for being “spectral”: an exile from the country that reads him, a presence no longer involved in human relationships, incapable (if also uninterested) in love and intimacy, “over everything,” only kept back from ubermensch status by lack of desire, motivation. We are meant to *believe in* WW’s encounters; are we meant to believe in LB’s effeteness also? Is he as spectral as he would have us believe, or is this part of his extensive labor of self-representation?

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Simpson says that Wordsworth’s narrators often act as though they are “immersed in a masquerade” (119). This makes a unique contrast to what McGann says about Byron, that he in fact *creates* a masquerade in *Don Juan*. So the issue of “masquerade” may be seen as pertinent to both *Don Juan* and *The Prelude*. However, look at the irony of Simpson and McGann put together: Wordsworth immersed, Byron creating. If Wordsworth is immersed in a masquerade, he is less in control of his labor than Byron, who controls his. Yet, it would be an unusual analysis that would maintain *The Prelude* to be a less-controlled performance than *Don Juan*. Masquerade leads to issues of *control*, which for both Byron and Wordsworth point back to the “middle self,” their positions as text-creators. Following through, an argument is available that posits less control in Wordsworth and more in Byron. I think that this is untenable, but I would argue for commensurability of control between the two. That means that what needs to be argued for is more control emanating from Byron and his text creation. This would involve demonstrating that the way encounters work in Byron is as carefully crafted as it is in *The Prelude*. Simpson says that Wordsworth often comes face to face with ghosts: hollow, amorphous entities that nonetheless signify earthly realities of failed materialism. I would argue that in the teleological sense, Byron adopts a similar strategy through different means: Haidee, Julia, Dudu are all the opposite of ghosts: Byron goes out of his way to depict them in their material splendor. Yet they wind up signifying almost precisely the same failed materialism that Wordsworth’s beggar, soldier, and peasant girl do. Their physical appeal is a quickly extinguished flame; they are “lit” only to be snuffed out. They enact this process through their interactions with Don Juan: ignition, consummation, extinguishment. What is in Byron dynamism is in Wordsworth stasis: the soldier, London beggar, peasant girl do not go through a transformative process: rather, they force Wordsworth-as-protagonist, and Wordsworth’s audience as collaborative laborers, to self-transform in the process of registering, absorbing, and interpreting their existence. By showing transformation *in* his agents, Byron considerably lessens the labor necessary for his audience to appreciate his poem. By forcing a transformation in himself and his readers (who are, Wordsworth hopes, steeped in a process of serious, laborious identification with his self-identified protagonists), Wordsworth increases the labor-load. We are meant to share his bewilderment and investigate our own reactions to it. Byron creates a masquerade for us; Wordsworth takes us to a masquerade but limits the extent to which masks are removed. The removal of masks is an active process; if depiction of failed materialism is the ultimate end, we may see a similarity in Byron and Wordsworth: yet the division of labor created between reader and text-creator is radically different, as is the tone each text creator adopts. Wordsworth wants us to “skip over” his place as text-creator in his binds; we are meant to affectively bond with and actively identify with the “first Wordsworth.” Byron changes this

so that we identify with his “middle Self,” and his protagonist takes on the quality of (without being unduly harsh) a stooge or patsy.

This is important because it highlights the difficulty of Wordsworth’s project, a genuine threat to the efficacy of his binds. Wordsworth forces the reader into a position in which we must trust the protagonist, and try to ignore his position as text-creator. If we mistrust one or the other, it makes it difficult for the chain to function, and the enormous demand placed on us as readers creates cognitive dissonance. The placement of protagonist and text creator here can be taken as a “double displacement,” rather than a continuum; we have no way of knowing what is being elided, nor are we sure that what we are seeing is an organic representation. Wordsworth’s “masquerade,” unlike Byron’s, is supposed to be objectively real; the masquerade effect is created by material circumstances; the protagonist is a bewildered spectator. Yet textual creation itself is a form of masquerade, and Wordsworth evades this acknowledgement (which Byron perpetually affirms). So, the leap of faith (or Coleridge’s suspension of disbelief) is enormous, and what would be a real language of masquerades remains conflicted.

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A key part of my thesis regarding LB, WW and the Labor Chain is this: that LB’s engagement with his audience involved him doing “double time,” in a way that WW did not. LB was, very evidently, a highly disciplined, highly productive, prolific poet. Yet the persona he created for himself necessitated that he appear to be just the opposite: an aristocrat without serious occupation. I am arguing that LB’s persona was self-consciously crafted to divert attention away from the extent to which LB did labor with great vigor. LB must then, in DJ and elsewhere, attempt to “cover his tracks,” to be what he is not, to be what his audience wants him to be (which is exactly what he is not). So LB’s “double labor” involves textual creation that chafes against its own extreme discipline, skill, and liveliness. The net effect of this is that, because LB is doing so much labor (more, in fact, than WW), his audience has less to do; rather than initiating a potential collaboration (as WW does, and in the Iser-ian manner), LB seeks to entertain by the extent of his dexterity in maintaining a high level of both artifice and the appearance of intimacy. He does not necessarily want his audience to realize the different levels of labor going on; all his jumping around springs from an impulse that LB is not often credited with: the impulse to *take care* of his audience. LB reveals himself (once again) as the antithesis of his mad, bad image: a textual creator who creates a self-sufficient world in which his audience can feel entertained (by DJ’s misadventures), loved (by LB’s personal disclosures and confidences), and taken care of (by LB’s playing a role that is expected of him, and that his audience finds both stimulating and, in a paradoxical sense, “attractively transgressive”).

So, the common perception among Romanticists, which tends to take LB at face value and argue for a WW that labors with more diligence, is a perception that I would like to turn on its head. I would argue, in fact, that LB’s labor (specifically as text creator) exceeds in measure that which WW overtook, because LB, beyond having to maintain a persona, take care of a large public, and develop a narrative around a protagonist that is not him (all the while including enough self-revelation to weave through a thread of confessional intimacy), was forced to work in a context where notice of his work was not only probable but guaranteed. However, the second part of this “labor thesis” is just as important, and maintains that in an equal and opposite sense, because WW did not have to worry about

taking care of a large public, he was confident enough to leave certain elements of his text (the most obvious being the handful of encounters that leave such traces in PL) open, thus opening the way for a more serious kind of labor, and a more genuine collaboration, than LB created for his audience. In short, part of what I'd like to say confirms received opinion: that PL is, in many ways, a superior work of art than DJ. But the ironic twist to my thesis is that, LB's famous (and perfidious) insouciance aside, this is because LB was forced to labor *more* than WW, and not the other way around. Byron, rather than not caring at all, cared *too much* about his audience to leave any mystery for them. This matters because it is a level of LB's stance and approach to textual art that is often confused and which two hundred years of scholarship have obfuscated. Byron's dependence on, and (contrary to received opinion) deep regard for his audience's needs (a mirror of his deep need to be loved and appreciated), has seldom been written about, but the evidence, when DJ is reevaluated (especially in comparison with PL) seems strong. It means that even after two hundred years, Byron is misunderstood, and that DJ's reception and consumption (including the ambiguities regarding pirated editions) testifies to this. I want to show that DJ is still misunderstood as a textual artifact, and that the very ease in which it can be consumed is evidence of a whole network of tensions and insecurities that LB was compelled to navigate (and, in the age of media celebrities, still has resonance with us today), and which WW was not.

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One thing I would like to argue for is a kind of role reversal, where labor and class are concerned: that what is visible in DJ and PL are a "bourgeois Byron" and an "aristocratic Wordsworth." LB's productivity level was high: he created a large body of work in a relatively short amount of time. This kind and manner of productivity has more in common with the bourgeois ethos that was nascent in early 19th century Britain than with the aristocratic indolence that was losing its power and prestige. So, "Bourgeois Byron" was the hard-laboring poet, crafting literary commodities for a market-place that materially rewarded him for his efforts (though he chose to refuse the material rewards). Byron's productivity could be seen as a kind of factory, and himself as the factory owner. He was a successful literary businessman, and the tremendous irony of his bourgeois work ethic is that one of Byron's most difficult tasks was to hide the fact of his own bourgeois industry! The cultivation of an insouciant surface improved Byron's literary commodities, by creating a persona that had an element of Otherness, to draw a middle-class audience in. Yet this effort in and of itself has the mark of an ambitious bourgeois, rather than a leisured aristocrat. Byron was no dummy: he realized that the influence of the middle-class was on the rise, and that he would have to put some elbow grease into his writing if he wanted to appeal to the middle-class: in effect, he was compelled to become what he was pretending not to be.

The difference between LB's textual self, and the closely guarded reality of what his actions amounted to (the creation and dissemination of successful commodities by an astute businessman with a knack for appealing to the bourgeoisie) made LB, more than a laborer, a kind of literary acrobat, swinging between different selves, different realms. It is important that LB receive credit for working much harder, not only than he has been given credit for, but than (arguably) WW himself. WW never needs to maintain a pretense to be (class-wise) something he is not. Because he is not aiming to *please*, but to *edify*, he does not need to be a contortionist. The ultimate goal of WW's Labor Chain is not to take care of his audience, but to give them the opportunity of using his experiences to take care of themselves. With

Byron, he is more inclined to take care of his audiences, babying them with lighter entertainment and, in a manner of speaking, sneaking the realm stuff in the back door. But note that WW's stance is, essentially, more aloof and aristocratic than LB's is: WW's text-creating self is sublime, raised far above any norm, and feels no need to be readily understood the way LB does. WW develops his narrative at his leisure without noticing what his product, as a commodity, lacks (intrigue, excitement, passion, sensuality). He may, as Simpson says, register the "ghostliness of things" in his encounters, but there seems to be scant evidence that WW cares about crafting a viable commodity. Despite being a card-carrying member of the bourgeoisie, WW is (or pretends) to be raised above the cycles of circulation, commodification, and consumption where PL is concerned; these themes are addressed *within the text*, but there is scant evidence that the text itself was intended for the kind of wide circulation that LB attained. WW is, in short, a textual aristocrat, and LB is a textual bourgeois. As such, the two models of Labor I have posited must be fit into this framework: WW's more demanding Labor Chain (which demonstrates aristocrat distance), and LB's less rigorous one (which demonstrates bourgeois concern with audience response and its material ramifications). I am arguing that WW's Labor Chain, because it enacted less closure, less ease, makes PL a superior work of art; but that LB needs to be reevaluated in light of an affiliation with the nascent middle-class that has not been much investigated.

.....

And once, far travelled in such mood, beyond
The reach of common indications, lost
Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance
Abruptly to be smitten with the view
Of a blind beggar who, with upright face,
Stood propped against a wall, upon his chest
Wearing a written paper to explain
The story of the man and who he was.
My mind did at this spectacle turn 'round
As with the might of waters, and it seemed
To me that in this label was a type
Or emblem of the utmost that we know
Both of ourselves and of the universe;
And, on the shape of this unmoving man,
His fixed face and sightless eyes, I looked
As if admonished from another world.
(PL, VII, 286)

The first thing I notice about this passage, is a sense in which Simpson's reading does not work. Simpson argues that Wordsworth's encounters are with specters, ghosts, or half-alive figures that somehow signify or represent the commodity form. As such, Wordsworth steeps these encounters in equivocations, ambiguities, and different kinds of darkness. However, Wordsworth presents this beggar as "emblem of the utmost," which implies, not merely solidity, but a kind of preeminence. The utmost is a peak, a pinnacle, and individualized

point; the essence of the commodity form is its exchangeability or substitutability. So, half-alive the beggar might be (immobilized, which might be what Langan would notice), but a representation of the commodity form would seem to be out of the question. If the beggar is individuated, what does he stand for? Geoffrey Hartman would read him as a boundary figure, connecting Wordsworth (and, through Wordsworth's binds, us) to the immobile, fixed, "sightless" qualities of Nature (as does the old man in *Resolution and Independence*). However, it is possible to complicate a Hartman-type reading just as it is to complicate a Simpson reading. Nature belongs (and resolutely so) to *this* world; Wordsworth etherealizes the beggar to represent *another* world. Not only is the beggar signifying a realm that is both transcendental and Other; he has the stature to admonish Wordsworth, which implies that the Other world is *higher* than this. The beggar is only a boundary figure because he physically manifests in this world; ontologically, Wordsworth presents him as fundamentally separated, cut off from Wordsworth's own self-representations, which we, as the readers, are encouraged to trust. Two pertinent questions arise from this reading: what other world is the beggar inhabiting? Contiguously, what labor are we, the readers, expected to do to "fill in the blanks" with our imagination, "create" this world *ex nihilo*? Wordsworth plays with ideas of Micro and Macro; the beggar is the emblem of two kinds of knowledge, self-knowledge and what might be generally kind "Universal" knowledge, which could be empirical or spiritual. Universal knowledge could be broadly defined, in this context, as any knowledge that takes a self beyond subjective concerns. This creates a binary opposition: there is subjective and objective knowledge, each imperfect ("utmost" implies limitation), each cohabiting (in harmony or in cognitive dissonance) within individual consciousnesses. To have and hold two kinds of knowledge at the same time leads away from a unitary model of selfhood, which Wordsworth both wrestles with and idealizes. It seems like one way to read the beggar is that he becomes an emblem for an "utmost," because for Wordsworth "utmost" means "most unitary." Wordsworth perceives the beggar as somehow beyond dichotomy; as having lost the need to balance imperatives while maintaining a placid surface; as so unitary that the very idea of "unitary" is irrelevant. The Other world is the achieved, unitary world that Wordsworth wants to achieve; it is a *world within this world* that is Other specifically because it is perceived as Other by Wordsworth. The beggar *has* what Wordsworth *wants*. All these levels are included in the labor that Wordsworth has done in painting this scenario. The labor we, the audience, are asked to do is complex. We must pass judgment on Wordsworth's conception of unitary selfhood; pass judgment on how close Wordsworth comes to unitary selfhood Wordsworth comes, both as text-creator and as protagonist; decide to agree or disagree with Wordsworth's perception of the beggar as having achieved unitary selfhood; decide of this Other world is, indeed, "utmost," and if the beggar is truly "emblematic"; and either add this encounter to our "store," as Wordsworth has, or decide not to "buy" it. I believe that the beggar is, in fact, a commodity, but not in the same way that Simpson does.

Simpson sees these boundary figures as, in and of themselves, representing commodity forms. I believe Wordsworth wants to present them as "priceless," and "sell" them to us as such. The beggar is only a commodity to the extent that we, as readers, can decide to accept ("buy") Wordsworth's mini-parable. To make this judgment requires labor; Wordsworth seems to be counting on his readers' unwillingness not to buy something they have labored for. But what makes the beggar worth "buying" is, specifically, his pricelessness. The binds that Wordsworth creates out of this scenario are arcane and abstruse—the beggar's connection to another world, which Wordsworth perceives, and which we can come to know through Wordsworth; the underlying premise that unpromising

surfaces can contain promising (spiritually promising) depths; the belief in the divinity of man, and the human form, even when nobility of form is lacking; the sense that all sensory particulars may be united in unusual contexts to form a perceptible spiritual whole. The encounter “admonishes” Wordsworth; since Wordsworth encourages us to follow his lead, we, too, are obliged to be admonished. But the other world that Wordsworth perceives is the saving grace; if we bind ourselves to Wordsworth and his perceptions, we may be shown what it is and how it may improve us as thinking, feeling, and subsisting individuals.

.....

One afternoon, the first time I set foot
In this thy innocent nest and oratory,
Seated with others in a festive ring
Of commonplace convention, I to thee
Poured out libations, to thy memory drank
Within my private thoughts, till my brain reeled,
Never so clouded by the fumes of wine
Before that hour, or since. Thence forth I ran
From that assembly, through a length of streets
Ran ostrich-like, to reach our chapel door
In not a desperate or opprobrious time,
Albeit long after the importunate bell
Had stopped, with wearisome Cassandra-voice
No longer haunting the dark winter night.
(Bk III, 120)

This passage is anomalous in *The Prelude*, and also especially memorable, and so deserves some scrutiny, which I have not seen it receive. One ghost that Simpson does not enumerate (if we take this passage as a kind of “encounter”) is Milton, and it can be argued that no ghost hangs so heavily over *The Prelude* as Milton does. I would say that, in many important ways, this particular vignette does qualify as a kind of encounter. Rather than meeting with the half-dead representation of a commodity form, Wordsworth encounters a particular space, which is ineluctably connected, by metonymy, to his most important epic forerunner. It is a unique encounter because it engenders behavior in Wordsworth that we do not see elsewhere in *The Prelude*. Wordsworth is driven to the Byronic act of intoxicating himself, by two factors: a group of his peers who are doing the same, and the extraordinary event of occupying the identical literal space that Milton had inhabited. Uniquely, this vignette stands out as the farthest from labor that Wordsworth comes in *The Prelude*. It is, in fact, a debauch. There is (for Wordsworth) an unusual degree of irony in this, for the labor that Wordsworth is performing in narrating this debauch is part and parcel of an effort tied to the inspiration (Milton) of the debauch, who probably would not have condoned the debauch! So this passage is evidence of a Wordsworth who is not completely averse to textual games, to types of *playing*, to labor that is not always completely in earnest. There is also an element of physical comedy (Wordsworth running “ostrich-like”) which, while not presenting Wordsworth as Buster Keaton, humanizes Wordsworth in a way that is not merely respectable, professional, and transcendental, but *endearing*. Yet even in this, lighter context, it

is worth noting that Wordsworth's impulse is to atomize himself: the group drinking to Milton (we assume) hangs together, while Wordsworth separates himself to run through the streets. There are pronounced providential overtones: Wordsworth's extreme reaction, both to "sharing space" with Milton and to drunkenness, can be taken as a presaging of the labor that he will one day perform (and is, in fact, performing in the enactment of his narration). In this vignette, the burden placed upon the reader is slackened, because transcendental spirituality is supplanted by bodily sensation: we may have to strain to consummate our minds, but it is relatively easy to intoxicate our bodies (and to identify with the processes of intoxication). In this context, Wordsworth's binds are relatively conventional; he is writing about an experience (intoxication) that most adults are familiar with. However, there is a deep purpose to his intoxication which elevates the experience and makes it transcendental: the connection of the incident to the memory of John Milton. As such, Wordsworth encourages his audience to investigate the connection between *The Prelude* and Milton's texts, particularly *Paradise Lost*. Wordsworth must, of necessity, separate himself from his audience; he has a personal connection to Milton, we (probably) do not; but we once again receive the distinct impression that Wordsworth has a "blessedness" that we may be able to attain if we follow him. That is distinctly (and manifestly) *his* perception.

There are "slackened moments" throughout *The Prelude*, in which Wordsworth eschews hard labor in favor of nostalgia or straightforward reverie; this is one of them. Yet, even in this slackened context, there is the revelation of perceived intimacy between Milton and Wordsworth that needs some looking into. Several lines in the passage are addressed directly from Wordsworth to Milton. As such, we are presented with a direct implied comparison, which could be taken as a pretense. The comparison is made naturally and easily, and seems to have created little cognitive dissonance for Wordsworth. We, as readers, have two levels of labor (beyond the straightforward binds) to attend to: whether or not Wordsworth actually intends a direct comparison to be made between himself and Milton, and whether (if we deem this to be the case) we accept this comparison. Certainly, Wordsworth does not posit himself as drawing this comparison within the vignette, or not directly. We do not learn what his "private thoughts" are, but there is nothing to suggest that young Wordsworth yet deems himself ready to play the "heir apparent" role. Wordsworth as text creator, however, has deliberately set this textual event up as extraordinary, anomalous, and memorable. Its *sui generis* status within *The Prelude* isolates and highlights it. We may think of Wordsworth the protagonist getting drunk with the knowledge that he could become Milton, or with fear that he can never become Milton, but there is clearly a transaction being completed. Because Wordsworth does not here make a direct comparison, but does make a direct "I" to "thou" gesture in Milton's direction (an enunciation that suggests equality), I would wager that the evidence weighs things towards an interpretation that does, in fact, suggest that Wordsworth is directly comparing himself to Milton. But for a close reader, there is clearly some labor involved in ferreting this out. Once this is established, each reader must do the labor of deciding the aptness of this comparison. It does not seem that all this labor was an intentional move on Wordsworth's part; but there are occasions on which Wordsworth's binds, and things he either skips over or does not say exist in uneasy relation to each other, and this is one of those occasions.

.....

While thus I wandered, step by step led on,

It chanced a sudden turning of the road
 Presented to my view an uncouth shape,
 So near that, slipping back into the shade
 Of a thick hawthorn, I could mark him well,
 Myself unseen. He was of stature tall,
 A foot above man's common measure tall,
 Stiff in his form, and upright, lank and lean—
 A man more meager, as it seemed to me,
 Was never seen abroad by night or day.
 (Bk IV, 162-163)

The first line in this passage enacts a neat conflation of Langan's ideas about vagrancy and "wandering" (that vagrancy and wandering are a kind of manifestation of Romantic ethos and praxis) and Wordsworth's own ideas about providence, about wandering being in fact determinate, "mapped out" by the guiding hand of benevolent natural forces. In fact this line could be taken as Wordsworth's refutation of Langan's premise—the poet wanders (lets himself wander, free from the burden of time perceived as commodity, but secure in the knowledge that his experiences can later be crafted into useful commodities) specifically *because* he feels himself to be "led on." There is a deeply interfused presence that does, in fact, roll through Wordsworth's feet. It manifests gradually ("step by step") rather than in a rush; Wordsworth is seeking a kind of *synchronization* with this natural force. Time, freed from commodity form, is measured by a different form, priceless and incommensurate with it: the form of "a nature that builds." Nature (or natural impulse) co-labors with Wordsworth to enact the manifestation of providence; we labor to affirm this manifestation. Yet there is equivocation in Wordsworth's usage of the word "chanced," that implies an ambiguity on Wordsworth's text-creating stance: does Wordsworth really believe this is chance, or is he being a bit coy? This is an important question, for more than one reason: if Wordsworth is, in fact, in earnest, then his faith in providence is both less complete and less assured than we have been led to assume; if, however, Wordsworth *is* being coy, then "chance," is intended ironically (and irony for Wordsworth is not a characteristic gesture), and meant to reinforce that, (as the cliché goes) "everything happens for a reason." It is a subtlety that is never completely resolved; part of our labor involves determining these nuances for ourselves. Byron and his ironies are overt in comparison, and his overt ironies and absurdities add an egalitarian strain to an aristocratic performance; whereas Wordsworth's ironies are so neatly encased that only subtle readers will notice them. Wordsworth's willingness to let these delicate ironies stand is evidence of his aristocratic aloofness, *within the performance of egalitarian truth-seeking*. These figurations transpire on a site that holds the key that Wordsworth and Byron's binds: the site where Byron and Wordsworth create their texts. Text-creation would seem to have primacy over incident, situation, and encounter as creator and sustainer of meaning. It is the means by which incidences, situations, and encounters reach us, and (importantly), both Wordsworth and Byron recognize that text-creation is an incident, situation, and encounter in and of itself.

Notice the way Wordsworth phrases the first appearance of the soldier, as though the road he is traveling on is itself a kind of creator, with a work of art to offer him: "It chanced a sudden turning of the road/ Presented to my view an uncouth shape." Catachresis makes the road an instrument of providence, with its own agency. It is also revealing that the soldier we are about to encounter is initially seen as a "shape," rather than a person. On one level, this confirms Simpson's suspicion that these encounters are with ghosts, the half-live,

the dead-in-life. However, Simpson's view fails to recognize that these encounters are not merely with ghosts; they happen between Wordsworth and *aesthetic objects*. A "shape" could just as well be found in a painting as in a haunted house; moreover, aesthetic shapes are just as redolent of commercial realities as ghosts are, perhaps more. This particular passage highlights the ocular nature of the early stages of this encounter: something is presented to Wordsworth's "view," and not to his immediate fear or displeasure (as would seem to be the case with a ghost). Hartman's view of these as "borderline" or "boundary" figures seems more germane; for now, it is enough to notice that the way these lines are framed makes explicit a connection between this encounter and the way Wordsworth encounters *art*, rather than commerce or law. It is almost like the "uncouth" nature of the painting of Peele Castle, put into a broader context. Wordsworth first registers this "shape" through *seeing* it, rather than feeling (or lamenting) it. Since we see through him, it is reasonable to guess that our initial impressions of this encounter will be aesthetic, rather than social, moral, or natural.

.....

Conversely, WW's initial reaction to this shape does, in fact, enhance the impression that the soldier is not merely an aesthetic object but the manifestation of a *geist* to be encountered. The PL, as an endeavor, takes much of its weight from an air of intrepidity; yet we see that WW, as text creator, is significantly more intrepid than WW, as protagonist. Text creating WW is "over" his protagonist, securely above him; we, by inference, are meant to stand (also) securely above this protagonist. Yet, the position we maintain above him allows us to do the labor of understanding that he cannot. The idea of providence is passed along the Labor Chain; the protagonist *senses* it, the text creator both *posits* and *affirms* it, and it is up to us to *consummate* it (and our own minds in the process). In this particular context, it seems that we are to witness the enactment of a drama of providence. WW's protagonist resists the pull of this encounter; he seems to sense a kind of Otherness that is "too Other" to be managed along conventional lines; the drama is whether he will hold up his end of the providential bargain: providence bring gifts that take unusual, "ghostly" forms, that force a kind of reckoning. WW's response is marked by a recognition of his lack of power in the face of providence; yet he consolidates his own agency by placing himself in a relation of panoptical power of the soldier: "So that near, slipping back into the shade/ Of a thick hawthorn, I could mark him well,/ Myself unseen" If this is, in fact, a kind of ghost, WW adopts not only a panoptical gaze towards him, by a mirroring sense of sameness: he slips, ghost-like, into darkness, becoming a "shape" for others as the soldier is for him. This is a point not much touched on by Simpson; if WW's encounters transpire between himself and half-alive manifestations of the commodity form (itself, of course, as Marx noted, a kind of ghost), does WW's own "slipping into darkness" qualify to turn him into (himself) a kind of boundary figure? To what extent does seeing the Other create Otherness in WW's protagonist? The text creator that is securely above lets this happen organically. We must labor with him to answer for ourselves whether WW, the protagonist, is "infected" by his encounters. Simpson affirms that WW is infected with confusion, ambivalence, fear, and misgiving; Simpson does not say whether or not this engenders a *likeness*.

However, the construction of the Labor Chain comes in handy to demonstrate why this might be the case. The WW most likely to take the ghostly form of the commodity is the WW *actively involved in creating the (or a) commodity*. As such, it is the text creating WW, the

second link in the Labor Chain, that would seem to be most likely to become the Other, if Simpson's premise is granted. The WW that hides behind trees does, in a sense, make himself ghostly, but only in a minor (and possibly comedic) way. The text creator is a commodity maker; the text is a commodity; thus, WW creating a scene for us has (in some sense) more in common with the soldier than the guileless, securely textually mastered protagonist. The protagonist hides behind a tree; the text creator hides behind text; both are laboring to come to terms with something not securely mastered. Indeed, as the episode continues, it is clear that WW has no intention of presenting a "closed" situation. It is our labor to interpret it, and to sort out three different possible ghosts: the soldier, the protagonist, and the text creator. I do not mean to imply that I accept Simpson's premise uncritically (or my own, for that matter): But commodities are not the only ghosts, and there are levels to ghostliness that can be taken beyond where Simpson takes his. Text itself, in the deconstructive firmament, is a ghost; the "non-presence of the present," in Derrida's words. Fixating too narrowly on a Marxist reading of this passage impoverishes it, both as text and as a multi-leveled textual construct. You could even argue that WW is hiding behind a tree because he feels the actual weight of the soldier's existence too strongly. It is such a weighty force that it rivets WW to a hiding place; there is nothing ethereal about it.

.....

"He performs as another icon of the new labor discipline, with the poet cast as the bewildered operative trying to keep up..." (Simpson, 93)

"it appeared to me/ He traveled without pain, and I beheld/ with ill-suppressed astonishment his tall/ and ghastly figure moving at my side" (IV, 166)

Simpson's formulation of this episode presupposes the agency of Wordsworth as text creator: the poet protagonist is "cast," in a kind of theatrical production that takes the form of a vignette, while the soldier "performs." Yet, because Simpson is arguing for the "ghostliness" of the soldier, this seems problematic. Ghosts are unpredictable; their movements cannot be anticipated, and their very evanescence insures a certain amount of inscrutability. Simpson argues that the soldier here is both ghost and "automaton," and that this combination aligns him with the "new labor discipline" (which Simpson never strictly defines, but which seems to refer to commodity forms taking the place of human ones, or of an interchangeability between the two); however, I think a viable argument could be made that "ghost" and "automaton" are mutually exclusive, when converted into human terms. The very essence of an automaton is predictability; Wordsworth's fear, in this scene, is specifically engendered by the fact that he does not know what is going to happen next, what speech or behavior the soldier will manifest. If Wordsworth were in any way certain, he would have no need to adopt a panoptical gaze. I also think that in some ways it is hyperbolic to call the soldier an "icon," even if (as is the case here) Simpson seems to be positing him as an anti-iconic icon (i.e. an icon who demonstrates his iconicity through negative/ "ghostly" attributes). Simpson gives way readily to his formulation, and, in some respects, loses the sense of Wordsworth's voice in the process. Wordsworth, both as protagonist and text creator, takes little for granted (where his providential encounters are

concerned), and maintains a distance of Otherness from the soldier, who manifests mystery, overpowering presence, and (despite his mysteriousness) substance; it is not for nothing that Wordsworth makes the uncertain semantic move of registering the soldier's "appearance" in traveling, rather than presenting the fact plainly: "The soldier traveled.." However, Wordsworth's uncertainty (even from the assumed height of his textual mastery) has a dual sense. It means what Simpson says it means, but it also means the opposite: Wordsworth is uncertain because the soldier *is a ghost*, but he is also uncertain because the soldier is *overwhelmingly real*. Wordsworth is able to channel this wavering sense of reality, and use it as a bind on several levels: we are drawn on by the mysterious figure of the soldier; we are curious about the interaction Wordsworth has with him; we want to know what the lesson Wordsworth derives from the encounter will be. It is a balance between ghostliness and reality, the real and the unreal, that makes Simpson's ideas take on flesh to the greatest extent, where issues of audience are concerned.

You could extend this formulation, also, to include the commodity form, and its implications: it was (and is) a ghost that has directly affected the lives of millions of people. However, there is some narrowness to this conception of the soldier, which negates other possibilities that a reader could labor to generate. Why is it that the soldier could not be taken as a military doppelganger for Wordsworth, himself? Wordsworth came of age in a violent era: the 1790s, when war with Revolutionary France was dividing English society. Wordsworth's Jacobin sympathies divided him twice over. It is not unlikely that Wordsworth had conceptions of the kind of soldier he would have made. This encounter may be an imagination, not just of an Other but of a second self. This makes the soldier a different, more personal kind of ghost than Simpson is positing: a path Wordsworth did not take, but that would have been available to him. The *overwhelming realness* of the ghost may have more to do with this possibility than with its status as a manifestation of a "new labor order." Divided labor has rendered this man homeless; but so has a life of abrupt stops and starts in military conflict. Simpson's "new labor order" dovetails with Wordsworth's binds only in one sense: it is a labored representation of the final bind: the reader's work. It is important that encounters like this be reopened, because Marxist critics like Simpson have, to an extent, *imposed closure* on it. While I would be belaboring things (pun intended) to go through every possibility of construction and reconstruction that a reader could make of this encounter, this novel possibility (the soldier as Wordsworth's second self) will suffice to make the point that Wordsworth has constructed this epic in such a way that the potential labor involved in interpreting it is (almost) endless. Wordsworth presumably wants his middle-class audience to apply their vaunted work ethic to the task of consummating their minds. The formulation of binds, as constructs, is congruent with *The Prelude* as an epic: a device for opening, rather than closing, which demonstrates Wordsworth's middle-class affiliation in its most positive light.

.....

FELICIA HEMANS: “RECORDS OF WOMAN”



The kind of binding sought by Felicia Hemans in *Records of Woman* and elsewhere was complicated, from the start, by Hemans' status as a female author. Being a woman deprived Hemans of a level of respect which both Byron and Wordsworth could, with some confidence, take for granted. Hemans was savvy enough to realize that being a poetess in Regency England made her stand out from the pack, even if it was in a context of extra limitations and condescension from patriarchal edifices like the *Edinburgh Review*. Thus, *Records of Woman* takes as its starting place the uniqueness, character, subjectivities, affective attachments, and domestic virtues that were commonly associated with Regency woman. In *Records of Woman*, we see female characters (many of them displaced away from England, for reasons that will be discussed) thrown into desperate, heart-rending, and pathetic situations. These situations evoke responses from female protagonists that can be construed as heroic; some demonstrate the virtues of the New Woman envisioned by Mary Wollstonecraft. These women do not so much thwart domesticity as they do enliven it with their perceptions and affective responses. Hemans was rewarded for these canny textual manipulations of prejudices and presumed virtues with popular success that placed her still beneath Byron, but (arguably) above Wordsworth in the marketplace. Susan Wolfson, in her chapter on Hemans in *Borderlines*, posits her success this way:

Hemans' poetry of "Woman" traces its "feminine" ideal on a fabric of dark contradictions. Nineteenth-century ideology tended to read the darkness as a peculiar Hemans melancholy, or a "feminine" excess that could be trans-valued as patient suffering, forbearance, faith, and martyrdom. (47)

The two component parts that Wolfson reads into Hemans, her "melancholy" and all the manifestations of her virtue, combine to make *Records Of Woman* the commodity it was. There are many reasons why *Records Of Woman* could have struck such a responsive chord: Hemans' considerable technical finesse, her choosing of exotic and/or famous locales or characters, the skillful way in which she domesticates her woman without making them the slaves, dupes, or "artificial, weak characters" (39), that Wollstonecraft sees in the unrefined domestic; but, ultimately, the most logical reason for Hemans' success is that women (specifically middle-class women) were reading in numbers that they never had before, and they were hungry to read about characters that they could identify with in print verse. The reading public as "luxuriant misgrowth" had, as one integral part, a female component. But the melancholy bifurcation of women that Wolfson notes makes the whole phenomenon of Hemans success take on a darker tinge. Wolfson does not enumerate precisely what these contradictions are, but certainly they include the following elements: women who were relegated to the private sphere could suddenly and unceremoniously be thrust into the public spotlight (Properzia Rossi, Joanne de Arc); virtuous women could be hitched to unfaithful men (Arabella, Indian Woman); or women could find themselves powerless to protect those that their domesticity bound them to (Greek Isle Bride). Feminine excess as such would tend to read woman betraying the manly stoicism that their male counterparts enacted. However, there is a certain irony in portraying Hemans protagonists as excessive (even if excess is posited as manifestation of "sensibility"); often, Hemans protagonists are reacting specifically *against* excess, against circumstances that have arisen because something or someone got out of control. No doubt that notions of excess, both embodied in female protagonists and reflected in extreme circumstances, allowed Hemans to create a bind that would be attractive to an audience used to (on a general level)

the mechanized humdrum of middle-class life. It is a different form of Byron's exoticism: with *Don Juan*, we get Byron, whose status as a peer makes him attractively Other; with Hemans, we do not get a central protagonist but a poetess displaced into many protagonists, each of whom has some level of excess (inward or outward) to deal with, and these levels of excess become *our* riches as an audience, and make *Records Of Woman* a valuable commodity. Wordsworth's system parades its desire for balance and continence; Byron's protagonist(s) parade their profligacy; Hemans's protagonists display their exotic particularities, in all their wealth of excess. There is no more excessive character in *Records Of Woman* than Properzia Rossi, who acts (with more directness than usual, for this text) as a displaced Hemans, bifurcated between art and love. Crucially, Hemans is not merely an artist but a *famous* artist, which lends credibility to the grandiosity of her affect, makes her a maker of commodities turned into a commodity for the duration of the poem:

Tell me no more, no more
Of my soul's lofty gifts! Are they not vain
To quench its haunting thirst for happiness?
Have I not lov'd, and striven, and fail'd to bind
One true heart unto me, whereon my own
Might find a resting-place, a home for all
Its burden of affections? I depart,
Unknown, tho' Fame goes with me; I must leave
The earth unknown. Yet it may be that death
Shall give my name a power to win such tears
As would have made life precious. (1-11)

Notice what the poem presupposes: there is a "someone" that is being addressed in an imperative fashion ("Tell me..."), and this someone is complementing the artist on the loftiness of her gifts. If Properzia Rossi claims the kind of posthumous existence that Keats eventually did, it is not because, as with Keats, obscurity has effaced her as a name writ upon water; rather it is because she is *too much* a woman of the world, too much coveted, too much prized. Hemans' makes the assumption that woman are both capable of having lofty gifts and capable of demonstrating them to the world and having them be recognized. It is a spiritual gift ("soul's...gifts"), not related by Properzia to the material realities of money and commodity fetishism. But her assumption of privilege, particularly of being wanted by an audience, is seductive specifically because those levels are simultaneously presupposed and transcended. The transcendence of art over its status of a commodity could be taken as a displaced form of an argument for women as more than bodies. Yet, that Properzia has both of these levels covered (women as more than bodies, art as more than commodity), and that this is visible from the opening lines of the poem, creates an exoticism that could enter her readers (male or female) into a whole other world, an alternative social reality with its own glories and limitations. It is important to note that Byron talks about himself in much the manner that Properzia Rossi does (not merely in *Don Juan*, but in "Fare Thee Well" and elsewhere), and it is his assumed privilege to do so. It is a fortunate accident (if not exactly, to enjoin an irony, a fortunate fall) for Hemans to have to do this; considering the status of women artists in England at the time, it *is* an obligation. But this poem has its air of the exotic specifically *because* it is set in Italy, because we can trace to what extent we want to see a displaced Properzia Rossi in Hemans and to what extent we do not. Hemans is very adept at using her resources *and* her limitations to craft poems that can entice, entertain, and

broaden conceptions of what constitutes the feminine in her society. Domesticity is by no means ignored; it is clear that Properzia Rossi's domestic affections have been rebuffed.

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There is an uneasy relationship at work between domesticity and art that pervades *Properzia Rossi*. That women should work is not in question, either in Hemans' poems or in the greater societal context that produced them (though female labor, as part of the workforce, was still a relatively new phenomenon during Hemans' lifetime); what lingers are the doubts (born out by some of the factual realities of Hemans' life, like the lack of domestic skill that Wordsworth chided her for) that they (domesticity and art) are of commensurate weight and importance for women to pursue. Hemans walks this fine line by presenting a protagonist who merely *resorts* to art, when her domestic presence has been thwarted. Art is a last refuge, something beside the point created only so that the object of Properzia Rossi's affections will understand her affective attachment to him. The extremity of the affect reinforces that, for many of these protagonists, sanity and common sense (or lack thereof) are, indeed, an issue. Tricia Lootens calls Hemans' protagonists "figures in extremis; they are heroines, but for Hemans they are also women whose sanity, and perhaps even humanity, is questionable" (243). The extremity of a protagonist like Properzia Rossi becomes a textual gamble that Hemans makes; will readers accept these female extremities (perhaps owing to their exoticism), or will they reject them as *too extreme*? It is a gamble (and *The Prelude* and *Don Juan* also involve their own sort of gambles, which are, where gender hierarchies are concerned, certainly less precarious than Hemans') that could have gone either way; fortunately for Hemans, the chord she struck did not prove too extreme for readers to bind to Properzia and her other protagonists. It is also interesting to note how these characters refute Mary Wollstonecraft's notions of domestic women, who "satisfied with common nature...become a prey to prejudices, and taking all their opinions on credit...blindly submit to authority" (41).

Properzia cannot be satisfied with common nature because her nature is shown to be incorrigibly uncommon. Though she may pine for the love that is about to extinguish her, the authority she submits to is that of her own inspiration, and her blindness also is born of her channeling impulses that are working through her, rather than impulses that are being dictated to her by another person:

Awake! not yet within me die,
Under the burden and the agony
Of this vain tenderness,-- my spirit, wake!
Ev'n for thy sorrowful affection's sake,
Live! In thy work breathe out!-- that he may yet,
Feeling sad mastery there, perchance regret
Thine unrequited gift.

It comes— the power
Within me born, flows back; my fruitless dower
That could not win me love. Yet once again
I greet it proudly, with its rushing train
Of glorious images:-- they throng— they press—
A sudden joy lights up my loneliness,--
I shall not perish all! (19-32)

The work that Properzia is discussing, the forces she is evoking, have a dual purpose: to indefinitely extend the life she is about to lose, and to reach the object of her affections that she has heretofore been unable to reach. These forces are seen to be part of her self, a portion of her own interiority (“my spirit, wake!”) that dwells not in her conscious mind but in her sub or unconscious, and it is a part of herself that she valorizes. Her notion of a life extending beyond her death can also be taken as a kind of self-valorization. Yet she swings back and forth between valorizing her gifts and degrading them; “sad mastery” becomes a “fruitless dower.” “Fruitless” implies that Properzia has not had children; Hemans, of course, did have children; but the deep ambivalence Properzia manifests regarding children, marriage, and domesticity may be one source of the questionable sanity that Lootens posits. Once this is in place, another question is begged: if it would be possible for a female artist in the early nineteenth century *not* to be torn by so many conflicting impulses that sanity becomes an issue. “Female hysteria” was not yet introduced as an issue when Hemans was writing these poems; but they manifest many of the symptoms, from obsessive relationships with men to extreme emotionality.

From whatever angle it is taken, *Properzia Rossi* is both a singular character and a singular poem. There are formal elements within the poem that make statements, in and of themselves: in 132 lines, “I” crops up 28 times, roughly once every four lines. A few things may be deduced from this fact, the most obvious being that this is a character Hemans identifies with so completely that there is a conflation between her own “I” and the “I” of her protagonist. The “sculpture” of the text is also interesting; mostly in rhyming couplets, each stanza ends with a non-rhymed line. Hemans also mixes in occasional Shakespearean stanzas (ABAB) at irregular intervals. This method of sculpting combines tightness and looseness in such a way that a text that could otherwise be claustrophobic and static *breathes* (though I hesitate to call this a method of “female” sculpting). The “I” we see here is unconscious (importantly) not only of the impulses that guide her hands but of the force of her own egotism. It seems relevant that the man, the object of her thwarted affections, does not make a direct appearance, even in her thoughts. He is elided, even though he is supposedly the pretext for the poem. What may be deduced from this is that Properzia (as Felicia Hemans) was a woman well ahead of her time, a woman who wanted it all: career, art, family, love. Her desire nature is every bit as excessive as Byron’s, but unsanctioned by social hierarchies. It is also important to note that she still has half of what she wants: her career and her art. The idea of the glass being only half-full, of her desires being half-fulfilled, seems unacceptable to her. There is a sense in which we see that her selfishness is more monstrous than the circumstances that have pushed her to her final desperate acts.

The question remains, what about her makes her capable of binding to an audience? I would argue that it is not only excess but *extravagance* that makes Properzia appealing as a character. All the exhortations, exclamation marks, and passionate ejaculations bespeak a state of total self-indulgence, which is aristocratic in nature. The transcendence of materialism, the sense that her art is above commodity, also elevates her sensibility above a middle class one. Thus, Properzia’s exoticism was not only of nationality but of *class*. It is a “double whammy,” and matches in complexity (albeit in miniaturized form) the total package that Byron offers in *Don Juan*. Unlike Byron, Properzia does not climb down the mountain to show us what it is like at the top; she plunges down the mountainside, and we witness her fall, though she maintains grandiloquence throughout it. Unlike in *Don Juan* and *The Prelude*, there is little sense of an awareness of the reader; rather, we are overhearing a dramatic monologue, that creates an entire world in front of us (again, miniaturized, and

compressed into a single vignette, unlike *Don Juan* and *The Prelude*), that is quickly effaced by the next poems in the series but may be returned to.

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The quagmires that complicate female fame when placed in relation to the domestic sphere are magnified when the fame is specifically *military* fame. This is most visible in the *Records Of Woman* poem that addresses Joan of Arc, and does so in a third person omniscient (to borrow a term usually ascribed to novelists) voice. Joan of Arc (in the context of a commodified literary work), unlike Properzia Rossi, is a widely known figure, one Hemans does not necessarily have to “sell” to an audience as worthy of representation. Hemans’ task is to place Joan in a context where her public fortune will be contradicted by her inability to maintain a domestic place for herself, so that the incommensurability between public and private sphere engagements will be underlined. That Hemans relates less personally to Joan is evidenced not only by a third person perspective but by an emphasis deflected partly away from Joan’s interiority. We do see into Joan, but only to a limited extent: Hemans’ “camera” pans out to show us the spectacle of Joan’s public success (manifested in a frenzied, adoring crowd), and how its scope is shadowed, for Joan, by the presence of the family she grew up with, who still recall her ability to engage domesticity and the virtues attendant upon it. Lootens article makes an intriguing connection between Hemans’ portrayal of domesticity and “National Identity.” Here, Lootens notes “ambivalence about the connections between domestic happiness and military glory” (240). The ambivalence is manifested in Joan’s shock and affective reaction to her family, in the way this reaction is portrayed by Hemans, and (presumably) by an audience who must decide for themselves whether female fame and domestic virtue are capable of cohabiting in individual subjects, or if the pull of the dichotomy is too strong, and must force a reckoning and/or a decision. In this context, these overt ambiguities *are* what bind the audience to the poem and the poetess: we must decide for ourselves what is to be done with the figure of the famous female, whether there is a dis severing which makes the phenomenon unworthy, or if military and artistic triumphs (as in *Properzia Rossi*) are redemptive. Wolfson seems to think the answer is clear: “In the bad bargain of female fame, domestic paradise is forever lost” (70). Joan wants “nothing more to be restored as daughter of home.” This is how the encounter (and this may be termed a “Hemansian encounter”, a kind of translation, in non-providential terms of Wordsworth’s encounters in *The Prelude*) transpires in text:

“Father! and ye, my brothers!”— On the breast
Of that grey sire she sank— and swiftly back,
Ev’n in an instant, to their native track
Her free thoughts flowed.— She saw the pomp no more—
The plumes, the banners:- to her cabin door,
And to the Fairy fountain in the glade,
Where her young sisters by her side had play’d,
And to her hamlet’s chapel, where it rose
Hallowing the forest unto deep repose,
Her spirit turn’d. (69-78)

It is interesting to relate this to Wordsworthian encounters. Rather than Wordsworth *seeing* a blind beggar with his eyes closed, Joan closes her own eyes and is in a moment

transported back to a spot of time which nourishes her just as Wordsworth is nourished by his. But this manifests in Hemans as a vignette, rather than an extended, discursive meditation; it is a kind of “sight bite” (rather than sound bite) with a rhetorical purpose and an allegorical subtext. Hemans seems to be convincing us that what Joan is envisioning is superior in virtue to what is actually before her (an adoring throng that she has attracted through military victory). The allegory seems to imply that female fame and female domestic virtue are *not* commensurate, that Joan’s life would have been better spent attending to hearth and home, an Angel in the House, rather than a demon of warfare. However, it is important to note that there is a sense here of Joan being *used*. She is not given a voice, as Properzia Rossi is, and the last portion of the poem, which represents the allegorical thrust of the whole piece (and there is, slightly ironically, a certain amount of phallic thrust to this piece, demonstrative of Hemans’ desire to be *seminal*), seems to come from Hemans, and Hemans alone:

Oh! never did thine eye
Thro’ the green haunts of happy infancy
Wander again, Joanne!— too much of fame
Had shed its radiance on thy peasant-name;
And brought alone by gifts beyond all price,
The trusting heart’s repose, the paradise
Of home with all its loves, doth fate allow
The crown of glory unto woman’s brow. (89-96)

For an audience to perceive this as either entertaining or useful enough to bind to (or both), they must acknowledge that these issues are pertinent. If the combination of fame and womanhood is deemed of no interest, it would be difficult for a poem of this sort to bind itself to the attention of individuals. It seems that what is meant to entertain is the issue of fame: for a middle-class audience, fame held (and continues to hold) a great attraction. It is one apotheosis (along with material wealth) of business, and a life of productive labor. The middle-class were (and remain) heavily involved in issues of mobility and, if they were (or are) successful, in *rising*. Anything that would take an individual above the common mean, thrust them into a spotlight, and force them to function or perish, would seem to be of interest. Hemans subtly uses her audience’s interest in fame to introduce the issues that would later constitute one basis of feminism: the possibilities for women in the public sphere. Hemans’ use of fame as a bind is made even sharper and more effectual by an engagement with recognizable history. Audiences like to see familiarity and novelty combined, and Hemans does this with great skill.

However, the duality of entertainment/usefulness is completed by the allegorical suggestion of a kind of inevitability: if you put a woman into the public sphere, *this* is what will happen. Domesticity will be killed off, the public sphere will assume a dominant position (penetrating the female subject, robbing her of agency), and an Edenic “paradise” will be shut off both from view and from a female subject’s participation. The levels on which Hemans is working simultaneously make it difficult for her to demonstrate Byron’s directness. Few would question whether a man like Byron belongs in the public sphere; he has a place that is easily acknowledged and acts as a resource and a springboard for him. Hemans must attack things from a more sideways angle: she performs femininity in her texts (things deflected, direct assertions not made), but must keep other balls in the air to say what she wants to say (and they must be visible only at strategic moments of disclosure, having

been properly contextualized). If we find “the heart of the woman under the robes of triumph” (Wolfson, 69), we nonetheless do not get an absolute decision *from Joan* as to whether her conquest of the public sphere was worth it. Joan has “lost paradise,” but she has gained something else; textual equivocations on Hemans part make this easy to miss. The allegorical resonance of the piece is tinged with edges of incompleteness. The simple equation, woman=domesticity, does not do justice to a complex character in a complex situation, as Joan is. The incompleteness of the poem’s allegorical dimension makes it more palatable, and also adds a rich source of rumination. Hemans’ audience responded warmly; she had touched a nerve.

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That there is some overlap between the terrain that Hemans stakes out in *Records Of Woman* and what may be broadly called “Byronic” is arguably. Byronism, as Christensen defines it, is involved not only with moody outlaws, Satanic melancholy, and wandering, but with the strength to represent these things textually in an effectual way. Hemans’ version of this set of characteristics is visible in *Indian Woman’s Death Song*, where we see a Medea-like protagonist propel herself and her child towards certain death. Wolfson reads this as a “Byronic anthem to freedom” (60), and in its intense rhythmic cadences and elegiac import, it certainly resembles parts of Childe Harold:

“With thee, my bark, I’ll swiftly go
Athwart the foaming brine;
Nor care what land thou bear’st me to,
So not again to mine.
Welcome, welcome, ye dark-blue waves!
And when you fail my sight,
Welcome, ye deserts, and ye caves!
My native Land— Good Night!” (I, 190-198)

The major difference between *Indian Woman’s Death Song* and this passage is in the extremity of the context in which it appears. Harold is leaving England, going into exile, having been forced by circumstance and his own dark impulses. The Indian Woman in Hemans’ poem is bravely facing extinction, for the simple reason that her husband has betrayed her, and she cannot imagine a life without successful matrimony. As in *Childe Harold*, Hemans’ is speaking *through* her protagonist. The poem is divided into two major sections; a sonnet-length introduction, in the third-person, and then the bulk of the poem, in the Indian Woman’s voice, in the first. This gives a sense of complicity between the Indian Woman and Hemans’, as text creator. She endorses the woman’s song by introducing it. That the poem involves infanticide constitutes another gamble on Hemans’ part; it would have seem to have been far from guaranteed that an early eighteenth-century audience would accept (let alone enjoy) infanticide. However, the gamble paid off, her two visible reasons: first, the woman’s exoticism makes her Other enough so that she constitutes neither a threat or an insult to Hemans’ audience; secondly, because Hemans’ labor here involves crafting lines with sonorous resonance (as manifested in incantatory rhyming couplets, that begin fourteen lines into the poem) so that the poem’s sound is (as Wolfson notes) pleasing to the ear and engaging to her audience’s emotions. This woman’s relation to domesticity is

surprisingly uncomplicated. That she has been betrayed is her only motivating reason to commit this double-murder:

Roll on! – my warrior’s eye hath look’d upon another’s face,
And mine hath faded from his soul, as fades a moonbeam’s trace;
My shadow comes not o’er his path, my whisper to his dream,
He flings away the broken reed— roll swifter yet, thou stream!

The voice that spoke of other days is hush’d within *his* breast,
But *mine* its lonely music haunts, and will not let me rest;
It sings a low mournful song of gladness that is gone,
I cannot live without that light— Father of waves! roll on! (20-28)

The simplicity of this rhetorical logic has moved Lootens to call this woman a “primitive protagonist” (243). What is most striking about the woman is not merely her capacity for language but her capacity for *action*. Whether suicide and infanticide are moral is one issue; but that, in their performative aspect, they are *effectual* is difficult to argue against; the climax of the presented situation manifests what might be called *negative effectuality*. This is a woman, whose sanity is as questionable as Properzia Rossi’s was. Properzia Rossi’s action constituted creation; Indian Woman’s constitutes destruction. Properzia Rossi’s situation offered at least a kind of redemption; Indian Woman’s offers no, except the solace of oblivion. Lootens asks, “does Hemans’ overwhelming melancholy cast doubt on her faith in redemption...of woman’s love” (245). Melancholy is not necessarily context-dependent; here, there is no faith in redemption specifically because the situation is reduced to basics: he cheats on me, he does not love me anymore, the child and I must die. That this is the course of events is made to seem inevitable, the effect of overwhelming forces that exert unconquerable strength; “the soul of the woman, Hemans lets herself say through this exotic voice, is driven out of this world by gendered tyrannies, propelled to death by the Father of ancient waters” (Wolfson, 307). Domesticity alone is no match for “gendered tyrannies,” that allow males to overthrow domestic ties whenever they wish and put females in a powerless, subaltern position. Hemans’ labor involves presenting this in such a way that her melancholy, embodied in the Indian Woman, is compelling enough to hold her readers attention. This poem has an incantatory quality that helps to offset the melancholy of its presumed situation and sentiments:

And thou, my babe! tho’ born, like me, for woman’s weary lot,
Smile— to that wasting of the heart, my own! I leave thee not;
Too bright a thing art *thou* to pine in aching love away,
Thy mother bears thee far, young Fawn! From sorrow and decay.
(35-38)

The encounter between mother and child exists as a displacement of the patriarchy that dictates the life of this woman— they tyrannize over her, she tyrannizes over her babe, and it is her behavior that exerts the strongest tyranny. You could say that Indian Woman is beating her patriarchal foes at their own game, stealing the keys of death and life for them, and taking back her life by deciding to end it, and her child’s life with it. But it is important to note, if we put Hemans in relation to Wordsworth, that the encounter does not involve mutuality— the woman does not recognize the Otherness of her child. She narcissistically

relates to it as merely a part of herself, as subject to the tyranny of patriarchs as her. Again, she displaces the narcissism of the patriarchal community that assumes her compliance. Her final act of rebellion, that will forever sever her from the patriarchs, is a way of forcing an encounter with them. Only, they will not be encountering a live woman, but a corpse. By the time the encounter happens, she will have displaced herself out of herself; self-elision substitutes for self-presentation. She will have removed everything from her physical organism that they can control. All these elements, made palatable by the Indian Woman's exoticism, combine to make the kind of poem that can enact a binding process with Hemans' audience. The emotions in the poem are clear and recognizable; the situation is simple and has universal resonance (potentially for men and women); and understanding and appreciating the poem does not take a great effort expenditure (though the exoticism and extremity of the character, the situation, and the thematic elements of the poem may be said to enact a confrontation with Hemans' audience; and, to an extent, textual confrontations can take effort to work through). What labor is to be done involves accepting the extremity of the situation, the extremity of this woman's decision.

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It is important to note that while *Records Of Woman* directly addresses issues of the feminine, there is an indirect gaze directed also at the masculine, the patriarchal, what issues orders of what constitutes decorum, what attachments are and are not appropriate, and what modes of expression are appropriate for each sex. As Norma Clarke notes, "the pages of *Records Of Woman* are filled with heroic suffering women and eloquently empty of adequate men" (76). The "emptiness" in these poems may be taken as a displacement away from the truth of Hemans' life; that her husband deserted her, and that the ideal of domesticity she was interrogating and often espousing was one she could not live up to in her own life. Marriage in these poems is seldom uncomplicated; often, as Clarke notes, "Marriage...is a bloody affair...awash with blood" (79). To make "bloody marriages" appealing to an audience, Hemans must labor against the impulse to merely confess; she must create scenarios that are compelling enough so that the "company of flesh and blood" generated is not one that complains, but one that avows strength and the pride of self-sacrifice in devotion. Nowhere is this more visible than in "Arabella Stuart," the first poem in *Records Of Woman*. Arabella is a young woman of noble blood who has been imprisoned for initiating an affair that presents political danger to the King of England. It was said that, having failed to escape with her lover Seymour, she degenerated into madness. The poem maps this degeneration, even as it registers the strength of her affect and her convictions:

'Tis past!— I wake,
A captive, and alone, and far from thee,
My love and friend! Yet fostering, for thy sake,
A quenchless hope of happiness to be;
And feeling still my woman's spirit strong,
In the deep faith which lifts from earthly wrong,
A heavenward glance. I know, I know our love
Shall yet call angels from above,
By its undying fervour...(28-36)

In Emma Mason's words, "Stuart is rendered, if not mad, emotionally broken by circumstance, a victim of the king's panoptical control and of Seymour's cowardice" (36). Yet, despite the "breakage," we are left to decide for ourselves if we find Arabella's "woman's spirit strong," and exactly what that strength is made of. It certainly involves devotion, but it also seems to involve a certain intransigence, an ability not to be moved (affectively or in principle) by outward circumstance. As in Anna Barbauld, the "feminine" finds refuge in a heavenward glance (though it is sexualized, due to Arabella's relationship to Seymour, unlike the platonic heavenward glance that Barbauld directs in poems like *A Summer Evening's Meditation*), and this has particular resonance and efficaciousness because the gaze of heaven is seen to be a leveling gaze, playing no favorites. Heaven is also a symbol, not of intransigence but of solidity, fixity, permanence. It is an opposite realm to the royal court, which was (and is, in modern political terms) fraught with contingencies, circumstantial inconveniences, factions, and spilled blood. What is most hopeless, in Hemans' presentation of Arabella, is hope itself; hope not of heavenly intervention but of the removal of oppressive circumstances. In the poem as in Hemans' life, the oppressiveness of circumstances was a continual reminder of how little effectuality was in woman's strong spirit. That Hemans' did earn a living from her writing was surprising, for her era; that it did not deliver her the male companionship she craved might have made it difficult for her to take pleasure in this achievement. While Hemans had at least some consolation, her protagonist here has very little, except hope that the pleasure and freedom that have been denied to her will be delivered at a later date. But her nobility is touchingly expressed, and this is a poem that, unlike *The Prelude* and *Don Juan*, goes straight for the emotions. Hemans' was often accused of sentimentality, and it has been noted that her sentimentality is what got her booted from the canon during the modernist era. The other levels of her poetry, exoticism, engagement with gender, attaching gender to politics, expressing inward realities in spontaneous overflows, were deemed unimportant by a new ethos of objectivity and distance, and the influence of the modernist sensibility (possibly a contradiction in terms) is only beginning to wane.

By the end of the poem, even Arabella's delusive belief that circumstances might change has been effaced. In the midst of overweening affectivity, Arabella reckons the fact of her captivity and that it is unlikely that she will be rescued. It is part and parcel of Hemans' project that even with circumstances bearing down with incorrigible force, the female spirit remains steadfast, and the sense of devotion to an elusive male (as in *The Prelude*) perpetuates a performance of all these virtues, on a kind of psycho-affective trapeze:

...too long, for my sake, desolate
 Hath been thine exiled youth; but now take back,
 From dying hands, thy freedom, and re-track...
 the sunny ways of hope, and find thou happiness! Yet send,
 Ev'n then, in silent hours a thought, dear friend!
 Down to my voiceless chamber; for thy love
 Hath been to me all gifts of earth above,
 Tho' bought with burning tears! (248-257)

The Romantic irony in this poem does not merely result from displacements; it results from the obviousness of the fact that Seymour is not *worthy* to be loved. Arabella equates Seymour's evanescent affections with "all gifts of earth," but her very devotion begs questions. The extremity of Arabella's affectivity begins to seem like an Achilles' heel,

though the force of the emotion (and of its expression) likens Arabella's sensibility more to a male than a female role. It is not necessarily Arabella's love that is compelling; it is Arabella's *need* to love that makes her a heroine. She is devoted to love as a principle; and dedication to this principle dictates her actions, thoughts, and behaviors. It is obvious that she deserved better than Seymour, just as Hemans' biographers and critics have argued that she deserved better than Alfred Hemans. However, this sense of Arabella as a victim, of someone who deserved better, is ultimately why the poem could be both understood and appreciated by its audience. An Arabella who is not deluded, who knows she deserves better and says so, may not have been an attractive commodity to nineteenth-century audiences. Woman must be noble, but must be *unconscious of her own nobility*. This leaves a space for readers to fill in the blanks for her, to feel what she lacks. Byron can afford (sometimes) to be direct; Wordsworth's convolutions have (often) no obvious end; they are both working on less delicate (even land-mined) ground than Hemans' is. For Hemans' to bind these protagonists to her readers, she must make them sympathetic by positing them as not demanding sympathy. They must give everything they have to others, and often receive nothing in return. Whether they are supremely good or murderous, as in *Indian Woman's Death Song*, they must demonstrate a base-line sense of idealism of justice, and it must be (grievously) transgressed. This assures that these women lack the self-consciousness that they are not allowed to have, and that both Byron and Wordsworth demonstrate in spades. It is a sideways maneuver that allows Hemans to place herself in the poems but not be detected, and a sideways maneuver that allows us to feel for women that cannot feel for themselves.

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BYRON AND VOICE IN “DON JUAN”



Discussing labor and *Don Juan* may seem to present certain contradictions and limitations. After all, Byron presents his epic as a site for improvisation, extemporaneous digression, and conversational élan. Jerome McGann says, “Byron’s *Don Juan* manner seem(s) to represent a synthesis of direct self-revelation, objective storytelling, and the art of the poet-raconteur” (McGann, 280). Yet a synthesis implies things, if not antithetical at least separable, being combined. There are no syntheses without labor, even if the labor is performed so naturally as to seem effortless. In fact, Byron’s effortlessness in *Don Juan* (manifested in easy rhymes, surprising wit, and extensive, effective use of aposiopesis) resembles the effortless grace of a modern athlete like basketball great Michael Jordan. It is no doubt laborious to make a slam dunk after enacting a ground-defying leap; but all we see is the startling beauty of the gesture. So it is with Byron. It is also interesting to note that the level of objectivity that McGann sees in Byron is matched by the completely subjective quality that Byron’s contemporaries saw in him. This is what Hazlitt has to say:

He is like a solitary peak, all access to which is cut off not more by elevation than distance. He is seated on a lofty eminence, ‘cloud-capt’, or reflecting the last rays of setting suns; and in his poetical moods, reminds us of the fabled Titans, retired to a ridgy sleep, playing on their Pan’s-pipes, and taking up ordinary men and things with haughty indifference...he exists not by sympathy, but by antipathy...all is strained, or petulant in the extreme.
(Hazlitt, 177)

What would a man this isolate, this “petulant,” this wrapped up “antipathy,” have to do with “objective storytelling”? Byron continues to generate opposition, across vast expanses of time, between readers who would like to see their own projections in him. My own argument leans far more towards McGann’s position than Hazlitt’s. It seems that Hazlitt’s experience of Byron was jaundiced by actually having known him. Byron, by all accounts, had tremendous personal magnetism, and left indelible impressions in the minds of many he encountered. With historical distance, it is clear that *Don Juan* takes on much of its piquant quality specifically because Byron is so objective, so “analytical” (also McGann’s phrase). For the sake of my argument, I must forget the slam dunk quality of Byron’s talent, and make the assumption that, however easily the lines came to Byron, labor was involved in the production of this poem, and that much of this labor was involved in an effort to *take care* of his audience. In this way, I am moving even farther from Hazlitt, and past McGann; positing a Byron that can not only be objective, but is capable of caring about other people. This caring is generalized out towards a wide public; Byron could have said, as Gertrude Stein eventually did, “I write for myself and strangers.” Nevertheless, the idea of a bourgeois Byron, creating specially-designed commodities to satisfy a niche (that was larger in numbers than any of his contemporaries could boast) is predicated on a Byron who has an affective attachment to this mass of strangers. There is a reciprocity between Byron and his audience that critics of Byron often miss; Byron’s version of binding, unlike Wordsworth’s, takes its strength in Byron’s willingness to “make things easy,” (or at least easier) than Wordsworth does. It would have been unlikely that Byron’s popularity could be so overwhelming had Byron been as glacial as Hazlitt claims; Hazlitt dehumanizes him, and robs him of his potency in the process. What is continually interesting about Byron, particularly in *Don Juan*, is his humanity, and the objectivity McGann sees is adopted (I am arguing) specifically to keep tight reins on the parts of him that *are* “strained” and “petulant.”

One essential facet of Byron is that it is a meta-poem, a poem that enumerates its own composition. As a meta-poem, Byron creates part of the textual bargain that makes *Don Juan* an attractive commodity: you can learn, not only about an interesting protagonist, but about how poetry itself is created. You can see into the mind of the poet *as creator*. *The Prelude* does something similar, but there is frequently a sense of difficulty and obfuscation; Wordsworth has something invested in keeping his processes secret. It is part and parcel of an aristocratic aloofness. Poetry, of course, has traditionally been the province of aristocrats; that Byron pursues a “meta” impulse distances him (or displaces him) out of his own social sphere. These are secrets of production; they show how this kind of labor is performed. Where *The Prelude* is concerned, we can achieve mastery by climbing up a metaphorical mountain to meet Wordsworth; where *Don Juan* is concerned, we have a sort of wise-cracking Virgil who walks up the mountain with us, pointing out scenes along the way. Byron totalizes this so that the picture includes not only production but consumption; how poets are “consumed” (textually and socially) in the public sphere:

In twice five years the “greatest living poet,”
Like to the champion in the fisty ring,
Is call’d on to support his claim, or show it,
Although ‘tis an imaginary thing.
Even I— albeit I’m sure I did not know it,
Nor sought of foolscap subjects to be king—
Was reckon’d, a considerable time,
The grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme. (Canto XI, LV)

Alan Liu has famously likened Wordsworth, during the Snowdon episode in *The Prelude*, as a kind of Napoleon. Wordsworth has achieved an epitome of power, conquered consciousness, sees things from the highest possible vantage point. It is then possible for him to taste real power. Byron *calls himself* Napoleon, and critics like Jerome Christensen have seen in him (and in the industry around him) a kind of despotic power. Yet it would be hard not notice how arch this self-reference is; it is self-conscious, self-deprecating (once the “imaginary” quality of the power is registered), perhaps even self-castigating (for the same reason). Moreover, Byron knows that his audience *will be entertained* by hearing him talk about himself this way; they are, and most likely have been, his consumers for many years. Byron is calling a spade a spade; he is commercially powerful, his labor is effectual (effectuality is another one of Christensen’s characteristics of Byronism), and part of the reason is that he does not hide behind the kind of systematic approach that he deplores in Wordsworth. It is also somewhat curious (given *Don Juan’s* wild success) that Byron talks about his power in the past tense; the implication of this passage is that he has surrendered the crown. Given that *Don Juan* was the most widely read long poem in the nineteenth century (as noted by William St. Clair), this can be parsed as an admission that Byron is simply *tired* of the Napoleonic role. For him (though circumstances still validate him), the game is over; he wants to play (the form his labor takes this time around), to entertain, to make another winning commodity; there would seem to be more use in more conflicts, born to oppose though he might be.

This impression is enhanced because Byron then goes on to talk about other contenders. Elided from the list is Percy Bysshe Shelley; Edward Trelawny claimed, in his gossipy memoir, that Byron was averse to “puffing” Shelley (despite their friendship) because Shelley’s condition as an atheistic disgrace would reflect poorly on him. Blake, of

course, was not then sufficiently well known enough to merit consideration (though it turns out Wordsworth had already read him by the 1820s); that leaves Keats, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and a host of lesser lights who had achieved some renown in the time. Byron always seemed to reference Wordsworth with a certain vengeful glee; here, he is mocked for having “supporters, two or three” (XI, LIX). To Byron, Wordsworth’s systematic approach was good reason to keep him obscure, in his place. The caustic quality of his language, however, seems to have two sources: a desire to enact vengeance against an aesthetic that threatened him, and a desire to be entertaining. These kind of dual impulses are what taken *Don Juan* out of the realm of *mere* entertainment and make it art. They are also evidence of labor. The view in we get does not gloss over Byron’s own faults. He labors to be as honest as he can be, saving us the labor that could exhaust us in *The Prelude*: trying to unearth intentions, figure out what the elisions and inclusions mean, “crack the code.” This is the way Byron deals with John Keats:

John Keats, who was kill’d off by one critique,
Just as he really promised something great,
If not intelligible, without Greek
Contrived to talk about Gods of late,
Much as they might have been supposed to speak.
Poor fellow! His was an untoward fate;
‘Tis strange the mind, that fiery particle,
Should let itself be snuffed out by an article. (XI, LX)

There is undoubtedly some crassness to this treatment. We know now (and Byron might have known then) that Keats was not killed off by his Blackwoods’ article; that, in fact, his TB was not caused by anything poetry related. Byron plays this for laughs but, as always, the impulses in evidence are not simple. Byron includes praise for *Hyperion* that is not merely backhanded; given his earlier, harsher evaluations (“Poor Johnny Keats’s piss-a-bed poetry,” etc), this is no small thing. Moreover, it should be noted that at the time this Canto was released, it is likely that the greater part of Byron’s audience had not even *heard* of John Keats. It is easy to forget that Keats appearance in so high-profile a poem was a kind of *introduction* into the world at large for him. It is odd to think of Byron as Keats’ patron; but, in a real sense, that is exactly what he was. Byron, being Byron, does it completely on his terms; but remember that neither Wordsworth nor Coleridge were given an entire eight-line stanza in this particular section of the canto. Byron’s textual generosity (leavened, of course by his backhanded humor) necessitated that Keats be given an introduction that, given the circumstances (and that Byron could certainly have gotten away with eliding him, as he did Shelley), was more generous than not. Keats was made a part of thousands of lives, just through this introduction; it would be an interesting project to try and determinate how much of Keats eventual valorization began here. Byron would not be Byron if this were done *earnestly*; but, by hook or by crook, the labor is performed, Keats gets his posthumous introduction, and Hazlitt’s evaluation sinks further into the historical distance. Would it occur to Napoleon to give favors to rivals this way? I am not an expert on the subject, but my guess is that it would not. If, as Christensen claims, Byron’s despotism was real, it was certainly benign, which immediately makes it non-despotism. Christensen sees a boogey-man in place of an artist; I see an artist who is fond of playing boogey-man.

Where Christensen’s book is concerned, there is an extremity to the fashion in which Byron is dealt with that belies Byron’s complexity. This is particularly visible in the manner

in which Christensen chooses to end. Christensen's ending, is, in fact, stunning, and very Byronic, but also likely to become infamous in the annals of Byron scholarship. It is (unusually for a book of academic criticism) a vignette, which takes us to Byron's corpse, lying "in state." His friend Hobhouse is viewing the corpse, and Christensen appropriates this gaze, redirects it, and makes it a metaphor:

...Hobhouse cannot be blamed for refusing to recognize the decidedly unbeautiful body steeping in spirit, whose "parchment" skin and "forehead marked with *hack* marks" register the unsparing application of the caustic of satire to the incurable itch of scribbling... if Hobhouse had listened as well as looked, he might have heard the lordly hack laughing at the ghastly figure he has cut before us. (Christensen, 363)

The pun that Christensen makes on "hack" is Byronic indeed; but is it appropriate? The insinuation that Byron was a hack would be an insult tantamount to comparing Byron with Southey. Moreover, there is a certain irony in this final formulation, given Christensen's premise; his book is called "Lord Byron's Strength," and one does not often compliment a hack on their strength. If we take this to mean that Byron considered *himself* a hack, it might make more sense; but the continual labor of honesty and objective analysis, efforts made to entertain the reader, make it unlikely that Byron would give himself this designation. Like the scene at the end of *The Exorcist* in which Father Karras briefly gets possessed by Pazuzu, Christensen seems briefly to be channeling Byron as he memorializes him. The difference is that, in a work of art, one is *allowed* to channel, to make these little leaps. It is a daring move for a scholar to step into an artist's shoes. My own judgment is that this attempt does not quite work; Byron is too much *not* a hack, is in fact the *antithesis* of a hack, so that Christensen's "possession" winds up tainting slightly an otherwise magisterial work of scholarship. However, as anomalous as this textual incident is, and as much as it misses the plain truth, it winds up being prescient of a whole tradition of Aestheticism and Decadence, much of which sprung largely from Byron's sensibility. How could anyone read this passage and not be reminded of *Dorian Gray*? The body that represents a disfigured, corrupt soul, but reveals itself only in death: this is Wilde's own denouement, to a tee. "Ghastly" is a harsh judgment on Byron's textual character, and (I feel) as unfair as calling him a hack. Ghastly is a more pejorative way of saying ghostly; Byron's living presence is so obtrusively in *Don Juan* that there is really nothing ghostly about it, or him. You could say his ghostly/ghastliness arises from the elision of his physical body from England, where his commodity was consumed; but that distracts attention away from what constitutes textual encounters, generally. Byron did not do reading tours, as authors today do; his physical body was generally to be elided, whether he was dwelling in England or not. As with "hack," "ghastly" is an insult to Byron's labor. Byron goes so far out of his way to be human (even, one might say, humane), that it is hard going turning him in to *Dorian Gray*. *Dorian Gray* is all secrets; Byron, in *Don Juan*, is no secrets whatsoever. Whether Christensen sees "strength in ghastliness" his text does not mention; but strength and ghastliness are an odd conflation indeed. In short, Christensen's indeed is an intriguing misfire, a kind of textual arrow shot into the air. I do not think that it hits its target, but perhaps it does not mean to. It is memorable, thought-provoking, and Byronic; it is in a tradition that Byron initiated and may well have approved.

Much has been made, and over a long period of decades, of Romantic sincerity. Exemplary Romantic poems attempt (we are told) to achieve a transparency, whereby subjectivities are revealed, in moments of transcendent, spiritualized epiphany. Whether or not notions of Romantic sincerity can be applied to Byron is still in question. What constitutes specifically Byronic sincerity? Is there such a thing? I would answer that the very facticity of Byron's body of work engenders a resounding *yes*. This body of work is testament to a strong work ethic, highly unusual among members of the leisure class, and aligning Byron more with normative bourgeois behaviors and ethos than might be expected. That Byron has a concept of labor at all marks him out as unique, for the context and circles in which he moved. This is evidenced by how Enlightenment thinkers theorized the leisure classes. Here is Adam Smith, in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

The man of rank and distinction, on the contrary, whose whole glory consists in the propriety of his ordinary behavior, who is contented with the humble renown which this can afford him, and has no talents to acquire any other, is unwilling to embarrass himself with what can be attended either with difficulty or distress... he shudders with horror at the thought of any situation which demands...long exertion of patience, industry, fortitude...
(Smith, 84-85)

Byron, on the other hand, courted difficulty and distress right from the beginning. His first efforts were scorned; he applied himself diligently, and the success of *Childe Harold* was several years (of frustration and incomplete successes) in the making. Bourgeois Byron seemed to shudder (like a good industrialist) at the thought of *not* laboring at his craft. It is a craft that, outwardly, he seemed to scorn. But extensive bodies of work do not happen by accident (even for poets who espouse an ethos of accident and improvisation, as Byron did), and that Byron was blessed with great fortitude, considering his beleaguered situation(s) seems reasonable beyond question. If Adam Smith had lived to see Byron, it is likely that he would have been stymied by him. Byron's great labors did, in fact, make him a paradigm-breaker; and I would argue that positive labor evinces a fundamental sincerity; if you labor at something (and the labor was, in Byron's case, not materially necessary and thus not alienated), you must sincerely want something from it. Byronic sincerity has to do with labor that is its own reward, which is performed because it is worth doing, and for the reason that the personality Byron reveals to his audience is compelling and unique, both through Byron's social position and through his specific experiences in the world. Byron's perversity necessitated that this be hidden beneath layers of insouciance and oppositional poses; but, by Smith's measure, there is nothing usual or proprietary about a man of rank scrambling to satisfy a rabid audience with successful literary commodities. Much of Byron's sincerity lies at the level of action, rather than speech (albeit action perpetuated in speech acts): *do not listen to what Byron says, watch what he does*. In this context, works of art are their own evidence, and make a highly unusual social statement by their very existence. Byronic sincerity is irreplaceable, and anomalous; it is the sincerity of individualism, heightened to an extreme pitch and thrown with fantastic velocity. There are things that Hazlitt says about him that are fair, like this:

Byron makes man after his own image, woman after his own heart; the one is a capricious tyrant, the other a yielding slave; he gives us the misanthrope and the voluptuary by terms; and with these two characters, burning or melting in their own fire, he makes out everlasting centos of himself. (Hazlitt, 179)

Hazlitt approaches this “himself” in a pejorative light, but does not seem to register that this is Byron’s consciously adopted strategy. It is predicated, as a strategy, on a demonstrable fact; that Byron’s self was more unique, more singularly situated, and more interesting than Wordsworth’s, Southey’s, or Coleridge’s could ever be. Byronic sincerity involves this self in all levels of social strata, and takes Byron into realms that the Lakers could not reach (both by want of charisma and want of social distinction). Both the Lakers and Hazlitt himself may have been effected (as we, centuries later, are not) by jealousy of Byron; of his mobility, his effectuality, his strength. However, I do not, as Christensen does, completely align this strength with despotism; I align it with sincerity that understands, completely and fully, the uniqueness of his situation, how it affects the world around him, and why he adopts a strategy that includes Byron himself as both a principle character and means of attraction. Truly, Byron *was* attractive, and he knew and used it. By incorporating himself into his work, he was playing to his strengths. His labor, then, was to create an accurate textual representation of himself (among other things), that gave pleasure and made sure that his customers were satisfied. I do not see the bad faith in this transaction that Hazlitt (along with the Lakers) saw. Had Byron’s egotism been *mere* egotism, we would not still be discussing him; to be reductive, this would make him like Southey. But Byron is sincere with himself about what he can and cannot do; this manifests in texts that are branded with a distinctive individual stamp, and whose laboring creator knows what works and what does not. Jerome McGann highlights this sincerity with great acuity in *Fiery Dust*:

The *Don Juan* manner develops out of our understanding that personae are being assumed and manipulated, that somebody...is having fun at playing roles...but this “nameless sort of person” can be seen as a persona only if we strip all useful meaning from the term...the “person” is the historical Byron...and the persona at the bottom of everything is Byron himself. (McGann, 287)

It is interesting that McGann makes a distinction between the “historical Byron” and “Byron himself.” It is arguable that the historical Byron *is* Byron himself; that Byron’s self-consciousness, rather than eliding history (as Wordsworth’s often does), is constituted by it. It is, again, testament to Byron’s self-conscious knowledge of his own uniqueness. It is legitimate for Byron to write about his history, because his history is (materially, blatantly) not like anyone else’s. Wordsworth wanted to raise his audience up, into equivalence with him; Byron knows that his social station makes this process impossible. Peers are born, not made. The result is that Byron, *because he cares* (not to turn Byron into a textual Mr. Rogers), brings himself down a few notches, adopts a middle-class ethos of productivity, and happily (by the standards of his class) gets his hands dirty. Wordsworth speaks, in his Preface, of poets having “comprehensive souls” (81); however, comprehensiveness has limits. Wordsworth can never know what it is like to be a peer, to move in the beau monde. It is because Byron really is comprehensive, and knows himself to be, that he adopts a strategy that revolves around him. Binds to an audience, in his hands, are a bargain in which Byron’s

audience can grow, not to *experience* but to *understand* all the levels on which Byron has lived. Byron's version of Snowdon is mostly material, and inaccessible; but Byron, unlike Wordsworth, adopts straight talk, to make clear in no uncertain terms what it is like; that it is, in fact, *not* a spiritual peak, and that it is in many ways not worth bothering with. Candor redeems superiority; unlike in Wordsworth, where superiority is (to some extent) an author's pretension. By the same token, Wordsworth's transcendent spiritual peaks have no echo in Byron; it is part and parcel of Byron's materialism that Wordsworth's mountains are not worth climbing. To Byron, they are (or seem) barely existent; the question is whether Byron is just too lazy to labor at texts the way that Wordsworth does.

Byron's self-consciousness of his own uniqueness, and the way this self-consciousness manifests textually, often takes the form of a kind of *seeing*. This is not the straightforward ocular representation we find in Wordsworthian encounters (straightforward only in the sense that we are actually seeing, through Wordsworth's eyes, an entity that occupies physical space); it is a mode of the witness to history, the poet that has experienced not merely encounters but epochs. Byron contains them in textual space, and sets them in order; it is characteristic of his labor that his comprehensiveness must be continually demonstrated. In this way, Byron transcends Smith, Hazlitt, and McGann at the same time; where Smith is concerned, Byron refutes notions of aristocratic obliviousness and indolence; that Byron notices (in great detail) everything around him that is not him refutes Hazlitt's accusations of extreme egotism; and in this process, role-playing seems to cease, as Byron comes down from the mountaintop, not to bequeath a tablet but just to inform:

Talk not of seventy years as age; in seven
I have seen more changes, down from monarchs to
The humblest individual under heaven,
Than might suffice a moderate century through.
I knew that nought was lasting, but now even
Change grows too changeable, without being new:
Nought's permanent among the human race,
Except the Whigs *not* getting into place. (XXI, LXXXII)

The enjambed rhymes in this stanza create a sense of the chaos, devastation, and upheaval that Byron has witnessed; his own place in the chaos, his particular station, is elided, though he does privilege his own viewpoint. There is, arguably, an element of egotism to this; but the egotism of *seeing* is significantly different than the egotism of *doing*. It takes its significance specifically from things it has merely witnessed, and is worthwhile only to the extent that things outside the self are noticed, registered, catalogued, presented, and then labored into representative text. Byron's ambivalence about metaphysics, and about systems that result from them, is explained by the feelings of impermanence that unsettle him; systems create illusions of permanence and stability that Byron has seen refuted by "that unspiritual God, circumstance," both in his own life and in the political changes he has witnessed. There would seem to be a connection between what is permanent and what is unitary; unitary things (poems or systems) are, to Byron, misrepresentations of an essential impermanence that he has seen demonstrated. But it is important to notice, in this textual instance, that Byron does not appear to be *trying* to refute Wordsworthian unitary or systematic illusions; it is one of the great ironies of comparing *The Prelude* to *Don Juan* that Byron so frequently erupts with volcanic overflows of powerful feeling, in a manner that Wordsworth does not. That is certainly the case here. It is almost a *cri de couer* that demonstrates a "strength" that is

more affective than Christensen seems to give Byron credit for. It is a picture of absolute discomfort: “change grows too changeable, without being new” posits Byron as, rather than a despot, a prisoner of despotic circumstance. There is ample evidence that Byron did, in fact, consider himself more ruled-over than ruling: Christensen’s paradigm only works when Byron’s texts are placed, as commodities, into a market place. Yet, Byron’s labor seems to involve a willingness not just to disclose or inform, but to confess, and to do so with authentic urgency. This pivotal eleventh canto does have an explosive quality, unique in *Don Juan*. Byron’s eruptive affectivity finds sufficient matter in what he has seen which, as he knows, and as his readers know, distinguishes him from the vast majority of the human race. If “circumstance, that unspiritual God” is a card game, Byron has been dealt a royal flush; but he has experienced this fortune as, often as not, something as bothersome as his club foot. What he sees is conditioned by the hand he has been dealt, and covers a scope and a kind of extremity that Wordsworth (and Coleridge) could not claim. At this point in the text, Byron adopts anaphora, which he does not make frequent use of, and that lends this series of stanzas a heightened sense of drama and importance:

I have seen Landholders without a rap—
I have seen Joanna Southcote— I have seen
The House of Commons turn’d to a tax trap—
I have seen that sad affair of the late Queen—
I have seen crowns worn instead of a fool’s cap—
I have seen a Congress doing all that’s mean—
I have seen some nations, like o’erloaded asses,
Kick off their burthens— meaning the high classes. (XXI, LXXXV)

Certainly the final couplet here holds a rather startling punch. It is especially startling not only for the unconventional rhyme of “asses” with “classes,” but because it directly implicates Byron himself; he is, of course, a member of the high classes. When politics comes up and push comes to shove, Byron is more than willing to see things in a stark light, even if it forces him into an uncomfortable position. Where these revolutions are concerned, it could be argued that fine distinctions are erased; Byron becomes *merely an aristocrat*. He is potentially part of a “burthen” that “overloads,” and he knows it. J. Michael Robertson has presented strong evidence that Byron knew how to transcend his own status as a “burthen,” how to preserve his individualism in spite of it:

Byron is able to appear both an individualist and an aristocrat without betraying his essential individualism because the typical English aristocrat was both an individualist and an aristocrat— except that the typical aristocrat’s individualism was only superficial... (Robertson, 641)

Neither being an aristocrat nor being an individualist necessarily denotes pragmatism. In fact, it could be argued that neither an aristocratic stance nor an individualistic stance is pragmatic. Pragmatism, as we have come to know it, is a quality of the middle class. It is the conventional mark of the businessman. In presenting the high classes as “burthens,” Byron aligns himself unreservedly with middle class pragmatism. What is interesting is that this displacement is so *forceful*, and it is a force that is not visible in *The Prelude*. It seems that it is the force of affect, and demonstrates exactly *why* Byron was so simpatico with his audience. Politically, Byron’s sympathies were with the nascent middle class. His experience took him

into other worlds (which, he knew, held a certain amount of allure for middle class readers); his pragmatism, the part of him that *demonstrated* what a peer was really like, how he lived and what he did, could not have been more bourgeois. Robertson misses Byron's pragmatism, and in doing so misses the secret of Byron's success. It was not a calculated pragmatism; it was an organic equivalent to Wordsworth's ethereality. Byron's displacement out of the aristocratic class worked because it was not forced; he himself felt (and with great force) how burdensome the aristocratic system had become, both to France and the England. That he *acted* on his feelings in the creation of literary commodities, devoured primarily by a middle class audience, further perpetuates an image of Byron as not merely a hard-headed pragmatist but an "affective pragmatist" as well. In today's parlance, he *felt* the middle class. Byron dramatizes this by using aposiopesis between "burthens" and "meaning the high classes." He is creating drama around this textual moment because he wants this stance to be known, in no uncertain terms. He does not dwell on it, because he does not need to; unlike in Wordsworth, there is not an (albeit rewarding) code to crack.

There is hard evidence that the affective pragmatism I have posited in *Don Juan* was, in fact, a deliberate move on Byron's part. The struggles between Byron and John Murray regarding *Don Juan* demonstrate two strong convictions on Byron's part: that Byron thought that the approach he had adopted was worthwhile, and that he believed the general public would agree with him. As we know, Byron was vindicated on both counts. One particular correspondence with Murray sheds a great deal of light on the subject. Murray was pressuring Byron to write an epic. In 1819, Byron answered him thusly:

So you...want me to undertake what you call a 'great work'? an Epic poem, I suppose, or some such pyramid...You have so many 'divine' poems, is it nothing to have written a *Human* one? without any of the worn out machinery? (Letters and Journals, p.284)

As illuminating as Byron's response to Murray is, it does beg a few questions. What, in Byron's mind, separates the *Human* from the 'divine'? Significantly, Byron conflates the 'divine' with worn out machinery. To him, they are flip sides of the same coin. The kind of humanism that Byron is espousing is (I would argue), a pragmatic humanism. It has its basis in feeling as common as those Wordsworth himself espouses in his Preface. The difference is that Byron has no need to colonize and appropriate the voices of the rural poor or anyone else (though his texts do demonstrate the ambition to colonize the attention and funds of middle-class readers, via seduction). Grounding himself in common feeling balances the extremity of his experiences and their textual representations. Because he is a star, he must force himself to keep his feet on the ground. What is Human is just this attempt at balance: between the psyche and the emotional nature, the outward and the inward, concrete experiences and imaginative truths. Balance is, in fact, one essential facet of Byron's labor; Byron writes from an inner necessity to balance the diverse elements and impulses that have constituted his existence. The difference between Byron and his audience is that Byron's experience has been "extreme in all things"; what Byron shares with his audience is the level-headedness to keep these extremities in perspective. Moreover, the way these confessional strains appear in *Don Juan* refute John Lauber's claim that "it is a poem which is all episode" (614); in fact, much of what is compelling in *Don Juan* is what happens when Byron forgets the episodes he happens to be addressing, and chooses to extemporize, as happens in Canto Eleven. The fourth and final anaphoric stanza reinforces the impression that Byron is using

his extraordinary experiences, his breadth of vision, specifically to bind himself to his audience, rather than standing apart or indulging in indolence:

I have seen small poets, and great prozers, and
Interminable— *not eternal*— speakers—
I have seen the funds at war with house and land—
I have seen the country gentlemen turn squeakers—
I have seen the people ridden o'er like sand
By slaves on horseback— I have seen malt liquors
Exchanged for “thin potatoes” by John Bull—
I have seen John half detect himself a fool.—

The chaotic facility of Byron's rhymes add to the sense of intimacy and uniqueness that binds Byron to his audience: “and/land,” “squeakers/liquors,” etc. His usage of the Spenserian stanza is certainly a marked departure from the careful treatment Wordsworth gives the Spenserian stanza in *Resolution and Independence*. Byron's technical irreverence is seductive to an audience that may or may not respect technical poetry conventions to begin with. That Byron apostrophizes the “people” is a key move to register, because it seems “on the surface” so uncharacteristic. To this day, few people write about Byron as a poet “of the people” the way that, say, Walt Whitman is thought to be. Yet Byron's massive audience is testament to the fact that he was, for want of a better epithet, the “people's poet” of his day. There is, in these lines, an incantatory power, rare both in *Don Juan* and in Byron's oeuvre, which takes its power from the compulsion to *attest*. What makes the moment uniquely Byronic is that this happens in the past tense; these are things Byron *has seen*, rather than things he is seeing or may see in the future. Byron thus, even at the height of his passion, avoids playing the prophet or seer. In fact, there is pessimism at work that borders on nihilism: the much vaunted Byronic despair. Yet once again, aposiopesis creates high drama, which begs the question to what extent Byron is merely “staging” his authenticity. Jonathan Shears writes, “Aposiopesis creates a role for the reader as actor central to the establishment of meaning” (187); in other words, the drama of the moment occurs as a reciprocal movement. Byron invites us to bring what *we* have seen to the occasion. Particulars are mixed with generalities in such a way that much that is left out can be read in: who the small poets are, who the great prozers, etc. More particularity would be speechifying; this, Byron will not stoop to. His labor is to create a dialogue, which leaves space for additions and subtractions, as individual readers deem necessary. It is far from dialogism, in the Bakhtinian sense, because Byron's voice is so distinctive, singular, and recognizable. Yet the spaces and breaks of aposiopesis prove Shears' point that Byron *actively courts collaboration with his audience*. This is done directly and pragmatically; in Wordsworth, the project is more obfuscated by systematic reasoning.

Shears continues, “Byron incorporates an implicit invitation to the reader to become an actor and as a result tells stories in which a sense of theater is continually kept in play” (187). The invitation to the reader, both to collaborate and to be “in cahoots” with Byron, is one facet of the labor that Byron is performing in the composition of *Don Juan*. It is the labor of being “Human,” as Byron sees it, and it is important to note that Byron's conception of the “Human” seems to depend not just on “context,” as McGann posits, but on perpetual renewal of efforts to connect, on *process*. The process by which Byron creates a textual version of the “Human,” eschews the coldness and solidity of the unitary machinery (which Wordsworth still employs) for something more fluid. To begin fluid and remain fluid

is one challenge that Byron labors at, and he invites us to labor with him. The reciprocity that Byron envisions hinges on a *reasonable* amount of fluidity, going both ways. By “reasonable,” I mean the amount of fluidity that an audience which desires both entertainment and edification (rather than the enlightenment Wordsworth seeks to impart) could be expected to invest in a poetic text in the early nineteenth century. Pragmatism and fluidity do not have to make uneasy bedfellows; through labor, we can find a happy medium. Aposiopesis exteriorizes this process, as a kind of *textual wave*; LB generates it, we ride it. Yet Byron has also to ride his spontaneous overflows, and we have to generate the energy to continue reading the poem closely. The binds are there to bring us close to Byron’s vision of the “Human”; how close we come is determined on the extent to which we are willing to buy into the commodity that Byron is selling us. Wordsworth is not as directly engaged with commodification, but you could say that his ambition binds him to it to an extent. Byron takes the commodity status of his art very seriously, but in doing so is able to transcend it, specifically because the text (to him) must be a commodity before it is a mode of entertaining or edifying. To make a commodity good, you must give great thought to how you might engage your audience. By not acknowledging this process, or acknowledging it in a cursory way, as Wordsworth does, the risk is run of creating dramas that no one can identify with. On the other hand, Wordsworth’s distance from commodification gives him a freedom to maneuver in that Byron does not have. He can thus take his ethereality to the unprecedented heights of Snowdon, while Byron remains earthbound, both ruling and ruled-over.

To what extent was *Don Juan*, for Byron, a “song of Himself” (not, perhaps, a precursor to Whitman’s more earnest endeavor, but perhaps a sort of textual cousin)? The two strains that run side by side in *Don Juan*; Byron narrating the story of *Don Juan*, and Byron digressing, extemporizing, and confessing home truths about his life and the unique context he inhabits; an individual reading of *Don Juan* depends on whether we give these strains commensurate weight. It would be difficult to maintain objectivity in doing this, because it is (to an extent) a question of taste. What Christensen calls “circumstantial gravity” (214) in *Don Juan* (and McGann has a similar take on the importance of context in the poem) can be applied equally to both strains: Byron and his protagonist are about equally “tempest-tossed” where circumstances are concerned. Byron, then, not only has to present a balanced account of himself (in the context of his digressions), he has a hero to account for. However, I would argue that Byron, as he presents himself, and *Don Juan*, as he appears in the text, are not commensurate. Byron is a self-conscious Romantic genius, inhabiting many levels of textual and non-textual consciousness (sensualist, intellectual, moralist, aristocrat, bourgeois, rebel, poet, poet-hater); *Don Juan* seems a cipher in comparison, a parody of Byron as he existed as the young, struggling poet who scribed *Hours of Idleness* and *English Bards*. I half-agree with Christensen that “Juan commands its reader to reoccupy the institution of a society in turbulent passage to a democracy that is more than nominal” (253); while it is often difficult to decipher what Christensen is talking about, I take this to mean that Christensen sees this poem (in the Byronic strength it evinces) as a “command” to register a new level of freedom, as manifested (somewhat ironically) in another commodity. But if Byron is the avatar of this new level of freedom, as Christensen suggests, then it is a freedom mediated by the circumstantial gravity by which Byron himself is ruled: the despotism of time, fading interest, used up spiritual, emotional, and artistic resources (cultural and literal capital squandered), lack of belief, faith, and outright disbelief in redemption. Freedom and a kind of nothingness, blank space, are conflated, so that freedom is registered as a loss, merely a less onerous shackle than slavery. What freedoms Byron

documents are in the immediacy (McGann's term) of moments as they pass. Does this amount to "turbulent passage" or discursive stasis? McGann again:

...invention or creativity was a means to an end. The ultimate purpose of the imagination was not to create, as High Romanticism suggested, self-generating and self-justifying worlds, and orders...it was to present fictive conditions in terms of which the human world would be more completely revealed...(be) more susceptible to human judgment (161).

The democracy that Christensen speaks of is represented by a symbolic power that no one can seize. Christensen sees this as somehow having a "real" manifestation in *Don Juan* (which puts Byron in the strange position of fulfilling Wordsworth's desire to manifest a real language of men, albeit transposed from the setting Wordsworth envisioned). However, if Byron is, in fact, pronouncing judgments (moral, immoral and otherwise), does this not place him as a textual artist who is, in some senses, seizing the symbolic power that is available to him? It seems that the textual world of *Don Juan* does not merely make the human world susceptible to human judgment; it makes *Don Juan* susceptible specifically to Byron's judgment. It is part of his labor to use his unique social position to make unique judgments which (as he and his audience both know) only he is capable of making. Byron's very "specialness" as a social and textual entity both embraces and contradicts democratic impulses at the same time, and with the same strength; embraces, because Byron's pragmatism, openness, and productivity align him with the nascent middle class; contradicts, because Byron both knows and enacts the senses in which he is above the law, so singular as to be a law unto himself. All these judgments are clearer in the digressive parts of *Don Juan* than in the episodic ones. Byron's candor is itself an exceptionally complex textual entity, and, in its complexity, manifests as Byron's greatest strength. I would affirm, with Christensen, that it is more democratic than not; but that there is a turbid quality to Byron's politics (in the broad sense) would be hard to deny. This turbidity is especially apparent when Byron handles money and marriage, those two great bourgeois concerns (not to say that they also held no interest for the other classes). It is at this point where Byron's sympathy with the middle classes somewhat abruptly ends; he has *participated*, along with the middle classes, in these concerns, but is not merely *above* them, as Wordsworth would like to present himself, but is *poisoned* by them with a sickness onto death (even as they remain preoccupations):

I'm serious— so are all men upon paper;
And why should I not form my speculation,
And hold up to the sun my little taper?
Mankind just now seem wrapt in meditation
On constituencies and steam-boats of vapor;
While sages write against all procreation,
Unless a man can calculate his means
Of feeding his brats the moment his wife weans. (XXII, XXI)

There is a certain quality of vengeance to this final couplet and its end-rhymes, which breaks with the wonted breeziness of much of *Don Juan*, and into a mode of dissatisfied distaste. Byron is immersed in middle class concerns, but his immersion (necessary for the success of

the poem) is distasteful to him. At different junctures in the poem, everything seems distasteful to him. That is why, in one sense, “strength,” both as Christensen defines it and in a general sense, is an open question: is it stronger, as a creator of literary commodities, to affirm or to deny? Byron seems to be banking on the fact that it is more wise to trust his spontaneous overflows (whether they happen to affirm or deny) than to subjugate them to a system, in the manner of Wordsworth. But this very self-indulgence (which might be how Wordsworth would characterize an outburst like this) complicates the relation of Byron to democracy that Christensen wants to posit. It is, in fact, democratic to say what you want; but if what you want to say is heartily misanthropic, the principles of democracy are rhetorically confounded. There is no good reason for Byron to say “brats” instead of “babes,” other than the bitterness that has surrounded his family life. As a law unto himself, he throws a word like “brats” into his poem knowing that it will add pungency and a sense of unmediated candor. That Byron considers the issue of “means” at all is highly unusual, for a peer, and bespeaks a general awareness of conditions at the time he is writing this. Because his social position (and positions) are so complex, Byron’s directness can never really be direct. “Brats” in his textual mouth means something very different than it would in Wordsworth’s. The truth seems to be that Byron can get away with talking like this, and Wordsworth cannot. Byron knows this, and takes advantage of it. His complexity and general social elevation make him untouchable. This affirms Christensen’s designation of strength, but refutes the notion of a fully Democratic Byron. It is Byron’s specific glory that he is not fully anything. Even, in the general sense, “strong.” He is at the mercy of his own complexity, his own singularity, and how little freedom it has won him. Wordsworth’s bounded quality, though it necessitates a more unitary presentation than Byron must offer, gives Wordsworth the freedom of workable dimensionality. With fewer levels to manage (and far fewer people watching), Wordsworth can get on with his project in a more objective (or what he hopes can be more objective), thoughtful fashion than Byron can. He knows who he is; it is arguable that Byron remains unknowable, even to himself.

WORDSWORTH'S "PRELUDE": THE SNOWDON EPISODE



The notion of an *exceeding Wordsworth* leads to another facet of the argument I will be developing. It is a facet that emerges when Wordsworth is placed in a dialectical blender with Byron. The entire construction of *The Prelude* is, as I have said, contingent on the presumed willingness of a (presumably middle-class) audience to labor along with Wordsworth. Unlike bodies (in the context of marriages, intercourse), minds are not consummated merely via pleasure and ecstasy. Not that pleasure and ecstasy are unseen by the poet; Wordsworth's frequent recourse to formulations of pleasure in the Preface make clear that it is of key importance to his aesthetic. But the consummations, both achieved and projected, that Wordsworth enacts in *The Prelude* are of a more demanding nature. They necessitate labor, that goes beyond John Donne's famous pun ("until I labor, I in labor lie" (85)), and mix effort and reward in a tight matrix. Specifically, Wordsworth demands something not only by inclusions but by elisions, not only by textual activeness but by "wise passivity." In a certain sense, Wordsworth establishes himself as a *textual aristocrat*. By this, I mean that Wordsworth's textual approach in *The Prelude* puts a minimum of effort on ease and comfort. Serious parsing of the poem is potentially both rewarding and pleasurable; but Wordsworth does not insure his reader's ease or comfort. Thus, Wordsworth's awareness of *The Prelude's* commodity status is offset by its being above commodity status: what Kathy Psomiades calls a "priceless commodity." Wordsworth most assuredly does not *take care* of his audience, in a way that manifests eagerness to insure the success of his commodity. Wordsworth, in fact, seems to desire an engagement *above* commodification, apart from the bourgeois desire to turn a profit through an appeal to pleasure principles. Look at the way the first book of the thirteen-book *The Prelude* of 1805 begins:

Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze
That blows from the green fields and from the clouds
And from the sky; it beats against my cheek,
And seems half-conscious of the joy it gives.
Oh welcome messenger! Oh welcome friend! (I, 1-5)

It is important to note that "friend" here does not denote us; this apostrophe is to Nature. Right from the beginning, Wordsworth makes clear the reader, though implicitly included, does not necessarily rank first in Wordsworth's estimation of textual necessities. Wordsworth's conceit (and it is a trope of Romantic sincerity, and spontaneous overflows of powerful feelings) is that he is compelled to write from inner necessity, and no other reason. He is aristocratic because his pursuit of this sincere, necessitated ideal is uncompromising. Presupposed in this uncompromising stance is that Wordsworth can *afford* to be uncompromising; he can spare the cultural capital. This is a stance within a stance; Wordsworth's vaunted ethereality arguably conceals the full blown pride of a Mandarin. This was duly noted in *The Spirit of the Age* by William Hazlitt, in his essay on Wordsworth:

Everything...that is not an absolute essence of truth and feeling, he holds to be vitiated, false, and spurious. In a word, his poetry is founded on setting up an opposition (and pushing it to the utmost length) between the natural and the artificial; between the spirit of humanity, and the spirit of fashion and of the world!
(Hazlitt, 203)

The binary parts of the opposition that Hazlitt notes (natural/humanity vs. artificial/fashion) are not what Wordsworth is trying to surmount; Wordsworth begins with the assumption that he (as text creator) has already achieved his own version of “natural humanity”: he is going to show us how it happened, and how we, through him (and it is almost a mode of presenting himself as a “personal Jesus”) can achieve the same thing. If we were standing on the same lofty plain he was, there would be no necessity to read the poem. The exceeding Wordsworth must have already exceeded us for his binds to function; and our own non-consummated status as minds and hearts rests on our living out middle-class realities (the artificial pleasures and paradises of the city, fashions, commodity fetishes). I do not necessarily think an elaborate justification of what qualifies as properly “aristocratic” is necessary; but I think it does not need evidence to support the notion that an aristocratic ethos takes as its basis an assumption of superiority such as Wordsworth is demonstrating here. Conceptually, Wordsworth’s method of binding is resolutely middle-class: labor is, after all, labor (along with the production and consumption of commodities) is what distinguishes the middle-class. In practice, because “the ties that bind” is *my* interpretive construction rather than something built organically into *The Prelude*, and because its enactment hinges on a narrator who does not always makes things explicit (and, in fact, seems to make a point of leaving in puzzling ambiguities), I am positing, not Wordsworth as an aristocrat, but perhaps a *textual* aristocrat, someone both more aloof and more stringent than the bulk of *The Prelude* criticism has tended to present him as. This interpretation develops in comparison to Byron (who we will be getting to shortly), who I would also like to invert. For now, a few more lines from Hazlitt’s essay will take us deeper into the terrain I wish to cover and the possibility necessity of an author’s “binds” as an interpretive tool for *The Prelude*:

He sometimes gave striking views of his feelings and trains of association in composing certain passages; or if one did not always understand his distinctions, still there was no want of interest...his standard of poetry is high and severe, almost to exclusiveness. He admits of nothing below, scarcely anything above himself. (Hazlitt, 209)

If Hazlitt is to be taken at his word, then why a formulation like “binding” might be useful seems clear. It is, of course, two links Wordsworth, one link us: we account for precisely 33% of the action. Wordsworth’s intense exclusiveness (also known as the egotistical sublime) shuts out everything but him; accept that saving grace, that 33%, Wordsworth’s awareness of an audience, of those who might labor (as Hazlitt did) to understand his “distinctions.” Hazlitt’s use of the word “distinction” in this context is interesting; it implies that what early audiences found confounding in Wordsworth is not just what he associates but what he *separates*. What is artificial and what is real? What is authentically human and what is not? Wordsworth, as protagonist, quibbles; Wordsworth, as text creator in *The Prelude*, does not. Yet ambiguities are presented, particularly in the famous encounters, which we, as an audience, can quibble with endlessly. The fundamental issues of my argument have to do with how much we want to give this textual creator credit for. We must decide for ourselves whether or not he is standing securely above us; if he is or he is not, we must decide for ourselves why. If Wordsworth will allow in “nothing below” himself, and will admit of “nothing above,” the best we can labor for (if we accept his premises) is to *become like him*. We cannot beat him, so we must join him. The poem creates a

social context which is not social at all; distinctions between us and the author remain impregnable. Byron tells us (almost) everything we might like to know about him; he inhabits a world which is, in a sense, more bourgeois than Wordsworth. Byron is used to making concessions to commercial interests; in fact, he seems to relish the process. He is engaged in the perpetual reconstruction of what Jerome Christensen calls “Byronism” (XX, Introduction). His commerciality is part of his glory. Wordsworth’s borderline solipsism admits no glory but what is self-contained; the appeal to Others (and to commercial interests) is an appeal to labor first, pleasure second. Yet the implicit reward may, in fact, be greater than what Byron offers. It is a comparison between easy access and tough love, between promiscuity and continence.

Wordsworth’s tough textual love is complicated by the fact of his bourgeois upbringing and status. It would seem, ostensibly, that there would be more at stake for Wordsworth than for Byron, where crafting a successful commodity was concerned. After all, Byron’s social stature was assured; Wordsworth’s was not. Romantic criticism over the last few decades has found one focus (among many) in the idea of *displacement*. Usually, when critics like Jerome McGann and Marjorie Levinson speak of Romantic displacement, they are referring to a process of elision by which direct historical reference is excluded from Romantic poems. This evinces the belief (what McGann perceives to be an illusion) that poetry can, via imagination, transcend the shackles of history (and culture) and achieve transhistorical, universal essence. Here is McGann on Wordsworth’s “Ruined Cottage”:

“The Ruined Cottage” is an exemplary case of what commentators mean when they speak of the “displacement” that occurs in a Romantic poem. An Enlightenment mind like Diderot’s or Godwin’s or Crabbe’s would study this poem’s events in social and economic terms, but Wordsworth is precisely interested in preventing—in actively countering—such a focus of concentration. (McGann, 84)

The idea of displacement I am arguing for takes McGann’s conception of displacement and re-focuses it back on the poet himself. The moves that Wordsworth makes in *The Prelude* (and elsewhere) displace him out of his recognized social sphere and into a higher one. I call it an “aristocratic” sphere for want of a better term. He is above us (in the sense that he presents himself as having already attained a consummated mind and makes the assumption that his audience does not), and his conception of himself as above pivots on Wordsworth’s “actively countering” an emphasis on his perceived social and economic status. As we will see, an argument exists that Byron achieves the same thing in reverse; that a “bourgeois Byron” emerges who is displaced down out of aristocratic ethos and praxis (and whose maintenance of an aristocratic veneer acts, ironically, as evidence of this displacement). It is precisely Wordsworth’s “focus of concentration” that, in his self-perceived emphasis on labor, lifts him above interest in commodity-structuring. Perhaps because *The Prelude* is an epic, Wordsworth must go in to it as an *embodiment* of ethos, a unitary presence. This goes part of the way towards explaining why something that had heretofore been visible *in poems* was now visible in Wordsworth, both as protagonist and text creator, linked together by memory, imagination, and self-positing sublimity. McGann remarks of the “Intimations Ode,” “all contextual points of reference are absorbed back into the poem’s intertextual structure” (McGann, 88); in *The Prelude*, all contextual points of reference are absorbed back into the structure of the poet himself, as he (most specifically, his mind) is represented in the text. The displacement I am arguing for is more extensive and more thorough than what

McGann posits; it is a fundamental (and fundamentally personal) displacement that happens on a pre-textual level, on a level of assumption and pretension. This argument could just as well be said to cover the shorter poems, but it is at its most evident in the PL. It is a “strategy of displacement” (McGann, 90) that covers not the text but the sensibility behind the text. If one were to be uncharitable, it could be called a pose. In any case, it is necessary to Wordsworth because the case he is trying to prove must be presented as already having been won by him. His mind is consummated; to make us join, this must be evident in every apostrophe, every providential encounter. That this is a conflicted set of beliefs, pretensions, and stances is evident by the fact that Wordsworth withheld the poem from the public realm for so long. Wordsworth clearly felt that what he had done could be perceived as overstepping his bounds. Byron, whose stance was a stepping down (if not a stooping) had no such scruples. Moreover, Byron was handsomely rewarded. *Don Juan* became the most widely read long poem of its day. But if Wordsworth had towed the bourgeois line, the binds he created would not have had (or continue to have) their efficacy; for the reward to be reached, there must be a destination that is both lofty and secure.

Marjorie Levinson, also discussing Wordsworth’s shorter poems, created a formulation that suits my argument even more aptly than McGann’s does:

The original scene is registered stylistically and through the pattern of negations that the verse develops. The intention of the narration is to de- and re- ‘figure the real,’ so that the narrator-poet may restore continuity to a socially and psychically fractured existence. The larger boon sought by the poet and offered to his contemporary reader was the displacement of ideological contradiction to a context where resolution could be imagined and implemented with some success (Levinson, 6).

I argue that, where *The Prelude* was concerned, much of this action happened “offstage,” was, in fact, pre-textual, so that many of the approaches Levinson describes become axiomatic in *The Prelude*’s textual enactment. It is important to note that “the patterns of negation” are, in the context of *The Prelude*, balanced by patterns of affirmation; because Wordsworth directly addresses the French Revolution (among other things), it would not be fair to register the standard Romantic elisions as constituting a dominant strategy in *The Prelude*. What is dominant in *The Prelude* is Wordsworth’s de- and re-figuring of *himself*, both as protagonist and as text-creator. Continuity has already been restored; a unitary presentation is presupposed; what is hanging in the balance is how *accurately* the process might be transcribed. On this accuracy hinges Wordsworth’s narrative credibility; on this credibility hinges the amount of cultural capital we are willing to grant Wordsworth. It is only once these questions have been sufficiently resolved that we may begin the labor of ascending the mountain on which Wordsworth stands; Wordsworth’s labor is to make us see the mountain. To a close reader of *The Prelude*, it can be argued that ideological contradictions are *not* resolved, specifically because their resolution is presupposed. “Some” success does not do Wordsworth justice; a consummated mind (like a consummated marriage) is, to Wordsworth, a black and white affair; either consummation has been achieved or it has not. One must succeed in having the necessary revelations that Wordsworth has had; they must then be held in consciousness in a particular way. Wordsworth begins from a position of almost complete success; the more pertinent displacement seems to be out of a bourgeois reality and into the assured realm of the aristocrat. It is also an interesting question what is

being “sought”; the poem shows a protagonist seeking, a text creator seeking, but they are seeking two different things: the protagonist seeks unity with a series of present moments, the text creator seeks unity (via precise textuality) with a series of past moments, but in between there is the assurance that a past that has been fully assimilated is both presentable and, in some senses, finished. It is the antithesis, in many ways, to *Don Juan*, which displaces a series of present moments into the poem in a tautological way (the present is the present, as the present), creating illusions of intimacy and “immediacy” (McGann’s term for Byronic temporality) which *The Prelude* cannot reach. The key difference between my formulation and Levinson’s (though I am attempting to expand rather than contradict her) is that Levinson shows Wordsworth adopting socio-historical displacements to try and offer something to his readers; I see Wordsworth, in *The Prelude*, displacing himself out of his wonted socio-economic sphere (at the level of psychology and self-schemas) in order to lift himself and, potentially, his readers above all questions of history, economics, and social contexts; *not partial resolution but totalized transcendence*.

Alan Liu has posited the Snowdon episode in *The Prelude*’s final book (13/14) as a culmination of Wordsworth’s endeavor. It is here (if anywhere) that we witness the consummation of the poet’s mind; here we may join Wordsworth and consummate our own minds, through him. Rather than an engendering an apocalypse, whereby the mind somehow exceeds nature and enters a kind of void (a threat which Geoffrey Hartman pointed out, that “the mind (is) a power separate from nature, and opens the way to a new fear of nature’s death” (229)), Wordsworth finds a perfect balance between his own vision of nature, and the perceived bounty which nature presents to him. Wordsworth, as text creator, must find a way to represent this that will bind the reader to his vision. Thomas Pfau points out one key element of his strategy:

As Wordsworth shrewdly intuited...an audience preferred to be manipulated at the level of desire rather than to be subjected to didactic verse. Hence, to enable its prospective readers to coalesce into a class of like-minded subjects, an “imagined community,” Wordsworth’s *Prelude* encourages a highly collaborative...mode of...“overhearing” (Pfau, 271)

So, to make Snowdon enticing to us, Wordsworth has to “manipulate us at the level of desire,” make us *want* to climb Snowdon with him. This is one of the few instances in *The Prelude* wherein Wordsworth creates dramatic tension and release in a concentrated way; the encounters do not resolve (“climax”) like the Snowdon episode does. It is also important to remember that “consummation” has sexual connotations. Wordsworth shies away from direct representations of sexuality in *The Prelude* (Annette Villon is elided, Julia and Vaudracour’s encounters are only hinted at), but Snowdon is a moment in which nature is sexualized, with Wordsworth’s success in climbing Snowdon a kind of phallic triumph, and his vision a moment of “deep penetration.” This fits in somewhat to Liu’s assertion that Wordsworth atop Snowdon achieved Napoleonic grandeur, power, and (perhaps) despotic force; though despotic force and sexual force are separated by issues of intimacy, relations-to-one versus relations-to-many, and public space versus private space. Whether we see Wordsworth as an emperor or a groom ravishing a quiet bride, the import is much the same: Wordsworth is triumphant, sees what he wants to see, and his eyes take the place of a phallus. The tension and release that builds throughout the episode is an opening through which we can both collaborate with Wordsworth and be transubstantiated into his body.

Didacticism is complicated in the Snowdon episode because it is implicit in Wordsworth's textual representation of it that it is meant for public usage, meant to hold currency (cultural capital) for anyone who wishes to climb with him. As the tension builds, we want more and more to share Wordsworth's climax. The beginning of the episode is uncharacteristically terse, compressed for velocity, and one gets the sense that the time for discursive rambling is over, the time for action has begun:

In one of these excursions, travelling then
Through Wales on foot and with a youthful friend,
I left Bethgelert's huts at couching-time
And westward took my way to see the sun
Rise from the top of Snowdon. Having reached
The cottage at the mountain's foot, we there
Roused up the shepherd who by ancient right
Of office is the stranger's usual guide,
And after short refreshment sallied forth. (XIII, 1-9)

Also uncharacteristically, Wordsworth uses rhyme and near-rhyme several times in this passage: "then/friend," "sun/Snowdon," "right/guide." This enhances the impression that, as in a film, the action is speeding up (blank verse often being perceived as a form prone to stasis), headed towards an irrevocable target. The enhanced velocity (which is usually Byron's province) has the desired effect of hastening the reader's desire, via suspense: what is so extraordinary at the top of this mountain? There is a contradictory force generated, that we feel we are slipping even as we climb. Wordsworth's labor feels less like labor and more like something he is falling into. We descend with Wordsworth as we ascend. The Snowdon episode begins with this sense of disruption, of the unitary premises of *The Prelude* being unsettled. This effect depends on what has come before; unlike *Don Juan*, which resists its own efforts to build to anything and which goes out of its way to dissolve its own ambitions in digression. *The Prelude* delays gratification until Snowdon; *Don Juan* is meant to continually gratify. The advantage in Wordsworth's approach is that we get a sense of reward for our labor at the end, and it is (potentially) a reward for a job well done (though we must decide this for ourselves); Byron tosses off rewards here and there, but ends in anti-climax. What has Byron consummated? This episode also demonstrates the degree to which Wordsworth was misunderstood. Hazlitt can hardly be blamed for misreading Wordsworth; he never read *The Prelude*; but nonetheless, it is hard to read passages like the following without cringing for Wordsworth, and the degree to which he was reduced:

His style is vernacular; he delivers household truths. He sees nothing loftier than human hopes; nothing deeper than the human heart. This he probes, this he tampers with, this he poises...and at the same time calms the throbbing pulses of his heart, by keeping his eyes ever fixed on the face of nature. (203)

Snowdon is precisely the moment at which Wordsworth goes beyond this formulation. Nature, as he sees it on Snowdon, is as lofty and as deep as the human heart. Hazlitt does not even bring "mind" into this, but it is specifically Wordsworth's emphasis on "mind" rather than heart that makes *The Prelude* singular in his oeuvre. The catechism by which nature is given a face is apropos for the Wordsworth whose work Hazlitt knows; but

Wordsworth, with *The Prelude* subtracted from him, is not Wordsworth as we know him at all, and one who can easily be stereotyped. Of course, it can be said that even within the Wordsworth that Hazlitt *did* know, there is ample evidence (in “Tintern Abbey,” “Immortality Ode,” “Resolution and Independence” and elsewhere) that Wordsworth’s truths were more than “household.” Marilyn Langan specifically associates Wordsworth’s early work with vagrancy, ambulatory excursions: “the “democratic” right to wander” (79). What is important in this context is to recognize that *The Prelude* was a leap forward for Wordsworth, and Snowdon was a leap forward for *The Prelude*. Looking at the key passages from the later sections of the Snowdon section will confirm that it has a sui generis quality within the poem, without which it would be unlikely that *The Prelude* could compete with *Don Juan*. On Snowdon, Wordsworth is *in the moment* in a way that he seldom is, unmediated (initially) by an impulse to look forwards or backwards. As the episode continues, we see this present-mindedness reconfigure all the books that have come before it, in a dazzling representation of illuminated consciousness (and, crucially, represented with the same intensity, tension and release, with which it was originally felt). It does not *feel* like labor; it feels like a spontaneous overflow. The climax justifies the ascent/descent.

During the Snowdon episode, the reader’s sense of being “in the moment” with the protagonist is accomplished through Wordsworth’s own convergence with his protagonist. It is one of the few moments in *The Prelude* that can be directly compared to *Don Juan*; the Wordsworth that climbs Snowdon is more transparent than at any other time in the poem. By transparent, I mean that the Wordsworth presented in the Snowdon episode appears to be *feeling* a spontaneous overflow, which the Wordsworth writing *The Prelude* represents in the most unmediated fashion he is able to. We find ourselves able to bind ourselves to the protagonist in a way that we have not been able to for the majority of the poem’s duration. In a sense, this possible confluence of us with the protagonist is as sexual as the protagonist’s sensations on Snowdon’s peak. His “deep penetration” of nature and natural scenery is bound to our deep penetration into his immediate sensations. So, for a close reader of *The Prelude*, we get three bindings in one episode: to the protagonist, to the protagonist’s perceptions of nature, and to (in our imaginations) nature itself. Wordsworth as narrator can give us himself and his perceptions more easily than he can the actual, physical, literal scenes he saw on the top of Snowdon, in their facticity. Still, as a moment of “pay-off,” it both rewards the steady labor of ingesting *The Prelude* and points to what the deeper aims and motivations of the poem have been. This is reflected (pun intended) in Wordsworth’s use of light imagery in the episode. It is important that Snowdon be brightly lit, for it to function as both a direct representation of the wonders of nature and a metaphor for the mind’s possible binding to nature as a source of solace and illumination:

...at my feet the ground appeared to brighten,
 And with a step or two seemed brighter still;
 Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,
 For instantly a light fell upon the turf
 Fell like a flash! I looked about, and lo,
 The moon stood naked in the heavens at height
 Immense above my head, and on the shore
 I found myself a huge sea of mist,
 Which meek and silent rested at my feet. (XIII, 36-45)

This passage posits Wordsworth as a kind of Romantic as far as possible from Byron and his Satanic outlaw protagonists. Wordsworth here inhabits the “happy Realms of Light,” and is “cloth’d with transcendent brightness” (Milton, Bk.1), the precise antithesis of Milton’s Satan, who Byron so resembles. But the comparison to a Miltonic angel (or even, perhaps, to Milton’s God) is complicated by the sexualized (potentially secular) language; the moon “standing naked” is open to Wordsworth’s penetrating gaze, the mist is meek and silent beneath him. Yet if this passage counts as an encounter, and one that occurs in another ambulatory context, there is a kind of shock tactic that nature uses to get Wordsworth’s attention; the light falling “like a flash” demonstrates something penetrating through to Wordsworth, so that posited a recumbent nature (both above and below Wordsworth) is too simple. It also complicates Liu’s positing of Wordsworth as a Napoleonic figure in this encounter; Napoleon’s despotic demeanor is predicated on him being more or less unchangeable; nothing can move him. Nature is encompassing this protagonist, manifested in light and mist both above him and below him. The picture we are made to see is of a man joyfully engulfed, living in his senses, and it is not until later in this passage that the inevitable lesson is conjoined to this vision, and we see how this lesson complicates things. It is interesting that this all transpires in silence, that Wordsworth gives the ocular such hegemony; the Romantic canon is filled with instances of joyous noise, from Shelley’s skylarks to Keats’ twittering swallows. However, this gap is soon filled in when Wordsworth registers “A deep and gloomy breathing-place through which/ Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams/ Innumerable, roaring with one voice!” (57-59). Between the moon, the mist, and the “one voice” of these waters, WW demonstrates the “similitude in dissimilitude” (85) that he mentions in his Preface. All of these natural elements are forming a unitary lesson for him, which ends up being the crux of the Snowdon encounter (it may also be said that this encounter has a purity that Wordsworth’s human encounters in *The Prelude* lack, freed from the material constraints of the commodity form that Simpson sees in them, if we credit Simpson’s account). The passage shows that, even in the midst of a “universal spectacle,” Wordsworth must perform the labor of extrapolating a useful lesson, one that will enable both his own productivity and that of his audience. It is as though Wordsworth strategically lets himself drift into the world of the negatively capable, but only so far that he can make something definite, solid, and positive from it. He grasps for reason, but in this context, not irritably. Everything is measured, formed into a serviceable whole:

A meditation rose in me that night
Upon the lonely mountain when the scene
Had passed away, and it appeared to me
The perfect image of a mighty mind,
Of one that feeds upon infinity,
That is exalted by an underpresence,
The sense of God, or whatsoever is dim
Or vast in its own being. (XIII, 66-73)

The meditation “rising” is both phallic and penetrative. It must happen at night, when marital consummations, also, take place, and it must happen organically. It also weirdly complicates the sense in which Wordsworth as protagonist straddles the line between a Miltonic angel and fallen angel. First, we see Wordsworth in the happy realms of Light; then, as the epiphany rises in him, he is again, solitary, atomized, like Milton’s Satan. This makes Wordsworth himself a kind of boundary figure, of a different sort than Geoffrey Hartman

imagined. Rather than seeing an “Other” who represents a link to another world, Wordsworth as protagonist *is* a link between two worlds: an atomized world of contemplation, and a social world of productive labor. Wordsworth as textual creator manifests this dichotomy, gives it its own light, makes it perceptible. It is worth pointing out that here, as in *Tintern Abbey* and elsewhere, Wordsworth’s relation to “God” is somewhat ambiguous. Does he mean the Judeo-Christian God, or does he have his own individualized take on what God is, and does? Wordsworth looks amorphous next to Milton on this level. He also looks amorphous next to an avowed atheist like Shelley, or a pantheist like Blake. Wordsworth, like Byron, wants to write something with utility value for the general public. Both poets know that it is in their best interest not to get too specific, where religious beliefs are concerned. Byron *seems like* an atheist, but never spills into out and out atheism. Had he done so, it might have cost him his public. Wordsworth certainly has less of a public to lose, but he seems interested in gaining a public reputation and a public voice for himself. He wants to have it both ways: to be representative, while maintaining his integrity. It suits his purposes to affix this climactic encounter to God, without being too specific about *which* God he is addressing. Wordsworth seems to assume that most of his audience will take this God for the Judeo-Christian one. There is no evidence otherwise. But that no reference to a Savior is made, or to Calvary, is revealing. Wordsworth’s equivocations could be taken as him “playing the game,” and it is a game of establishing *likeness*, the same way that Byron’s game is establishing, on some levels, *difference*. There are complexities and levels to this positing; Byron’s difference (his aristocratic position, fame) are actually used as ways to attract, entice, and seduce us, a way in which we get closer to him; Wordsworth’s “likeness” is a method of becoming more representative, conforming to a standard that will allow him to speak in an acceptable public voice, and this position will have the contradictory effect of elevating him. Representativeness and likeness are linked ineluctably; this impression is enhanced by Wordsworth’s implying that what is behind Snowdon is God “or whatsoe’er is dimmed...”. Christianity’s God is irreplaceable; Milton’s God represents this; Byron’s “unspiritual God” is circumstance; Wordsworth’s mediates all of these Gods, while retaining a certain nebulousness.

Even as the Snowdon episode reaches its climax, Wordsworth seems to recognize that what he is doing (both within the narrative and in the creation of the narrative) is unique enough that it needs some justification. Wordsworth must prove the utility value of Snowdon; how it can be both assimilated and integrated into middle class consciousness. What Wordsworth must avoid is the appearance of this episode being so peculiar to him as to be meaningless to everyone else. This passage is perhaps the most passionately felt in *The Prelude*. Wordsworth goes so far as to feminize nature, which becomes a “she.” Yet Wordsworth is keenly aware that this is the scene that both offers the greatest reward and requires the most intense labor. Wordsworth’s rapture is not straightforward; it hinges on recognitions that are by no means general. Wordsworth’s fear of crafting a limb for his textual body with no connective tissue brings to mind (and may have brought directly to Wordsworth’s mind) a passage in Adam Smith regarding private passions, and their potential ridiculousness when placed into the public sphere:

Even of the passions derived from the imagination, those which take their origin from a peculiar turn or habit it has acquired, though they may be acknowledged to be perfectly natural, are, however, are little to be sympathized with...are always...ridiculous. (41)

Middle-class sensibility is a large and amorphous subject that resists easy generalizations; yet, to the extent that Smith is at least somewhat representative (and his sentiments seminal), it can be seen that propriety is seen to dictate sympathy, and that privately held passions (especially of the obscurer sort that Wordsworth is enumerating) leave Wordsworth open to accusations of self-indulgence, impracticality, and ridiculousness. If, as Liu writes, Wordsworth on top of Snowdon resembles Napoleon, it is a Napoleon who may have more in common with an institutionalized madman who *thinks* he is Napoleon than Napoleon himself. Wordsworth is at such a far distance from proprietary notions of business and commerce that even homologies between him and middle class concerns seem strained. That Wordsworth's passions, on Snowdon, are derived from his imagination would seem to be beyond dispute. For Wordsworth to make this episode translate as cultural capital, he will need to demonstrate exactly how and why it has practical value to his audience. The direct sympathetic influence of nature will need to be manifest in such a way that nothing ridiculous remains, and Wordsworth's formulations stand naked before the reader even as the moon stands naked before him as he stands on Snowdon. In the process of doing this, Wordsworth reveals that it is nature, not himself, who is Napoleonic, and that nature's hegemony is benevolent, and has utility value for those willing to gaze intently at what "her" power is and how it works. In setting this forth, and in displacing attention away from his own position (and his potentially ridiculous passions), Wordsworth makes the clearest case possible for the rhetorical blending of mind and nature as productive, and not at a distance from propriety. This takes the form of a kind of "power blazon":

That dominion which she oftentimes
Exerts upon the outward face of things,
So moulds them, and endues, abstracts, combines,
Or by abrupt and unhabitual influence
Does make one object so impress itself
Upon all others, and pervade them so,
That even the grossest minds must see and hear
And cannot choose but feel. (XIII, 77-84)

Nature's dominion is seen to be widespread and general. The "outward face of things" encompasses humanity in its jurisdiction; humanity is posited as part of a larger whole. What is interesting, and not quite clear, is just who Wordsworth is referring to as "gross minds." This can be taken as an implication of middle class materialism, and certainly "gross" is a word that has business/financial (thus middle class) associations. If middle class minds are the referent here, "even" implies that Wordsworth has very little respect for the world they inhabit. But that nature is a despot, and Wordsworth only a messenger figure or a proxy for nature, seems to be the subtext of this passage. It also contains enough fuzziness to require labor; we register nature's dominion and "cannot choose but feel" something; what? The fear and trembling associated with Burke's sublime? Wordsworth's own formulation of the internal echo between our minds and nature? Wordsworth implies that this question is a matter of individual initiative; that, if we follow Wordsworth up the proverbial mountain, we will feel something, but he cannot tell us what. Feeling is directly tied to sensory data, "seeing" and "hearing," but again, we know a unitary premise but labor is left for us to do. Wordsworth's commodity is *challenging* in a way that tweaks the very notion of what the commodity form is; it has the quality of a shape-shifter (or calloscope) that never shows the same thing to more than one person. It is designed, it would seem, to do this, rather than

to occupy space as something reproducible and aimed at a target market, as *Don Juan* was. Byron points out the ridiculousness of the world around him but is, in today's parlance, always cool; Wordsworth deliberately courts ridiculousness specifically to transcend this kind of facility. Wordsworth has his own brand of uniqueness, and the very obscurity of his systematic, unitary mode of thought is, in its way, as gutsy as Byron's candor. What Wordsworth seems to want to avoid is a text that is *merely* pleasurable; something as ornamental and stylized as the Neo-Classicists he is still attempting to supplant (as of 1804, when this episode was written); Alexander Pope's "true wit" extended past Pope's conception of wit into something more celestial. It is here that Wordsworth strangely dovetails with Adam Smith, when portions of Smith are de-contextualized, like this:

...that this fitness, this happy contrivance of any production of art, should often be more valued, than the very end for which it was intended; and that the exact adjustment of the means for attaining conveniency or pleasure, should frequently be more regarded, than that very conveniency or pleasure...has not... been taken notice of by anybody. (238)

It is unlikely that Smith had precisely in mind what Wordsworth accomplishes with the Snowdon episode; but Smith's pragmatism, which demonstrates the efficacy of art in creating effects in and of itself, fits with the manner in which Wordsworth makes a walk to a mountaintop much more than what it would be in the hands of a Neo-Classicist. Snowdon is designed like this: a means to an end. It is Wordsworth laboring to bind his audience to him by building a solid set of stairs leading to his self-created peak. What he wants to avoid is the process by which his audience might fall in love with the views collected while climbing up the stairs. Thus, the deliberate lack of ornamentation in Wordsworth's poetry, up to and including *The Prelude*, and Snowdon, is a concerted attempt to create utility value, through a substitution of *shared labor* for ornament. The general public's neglect of Wordsworth's work had much to do with this lack of ornamentation, which was seen to be more apropos in other kinds of arts (and Smith is not talking about poetry here), but which made Wordsworth look perverse and antisocial. Byron, of course, was a fan of ornamentation, and of the Neo-Classicists. He struck a hard-won balance between the ornaments of wit, cleverness, strategic disclosures, and the kind of base-line pragmatic insight that makes him still readable today. Yet, over the centuries, Wordsworth's very convolution has won him a deeper respect and loyalty than Byron's many strengths have. Snowdon can be taken as kind of a crossroads, where all of Wordsworth's impulses meet in a convergent pattern. It is a pattern that requires labor to decipher, and the reward for this labor is not assured. But "contrivance," in the pejorative sense, is avoided.

As Wordsworth moves from the actual experience of Snowdon to the moral lesson he extrapolates from it, he extends the usage of sexualized language. This enhances the impression that Wordsworth is self-consciously positing Snowdon as the precise locale of the mind's consummation which *The Prelude* has been moving towards. Like a work of pornographic literature turned inside out, the Snowdon episode functions by letting us, through empathy, experience Wordsworth's ecstasy (and, of course, it is worth noting that Byron was taken to task for being pornographic in *Don Juan*). The moral lesson can afford Wordsworth no slackening of intensity; though cut off from the vistas of sight and sound that rivet us to Wordsworth's actual experience, this portion of the text is freighted with the duty of both consolidating the experience of Snowdon and rendering it both potentially

permanent (in its import) and intelligible. The passage begins with nature again made preternatural, as a “power”:

The power which these
Acknowledge when thus moved, which nature thus
Thrusts forth upon the senses, is the express
Resemblance, in the fullness of its strength
Made visible— a genuine counterpart
And brother— of the glorious faculty
Which higher minds bear with them as their own. (XIII, 85-90)

Wordsworth is exercising his demarcative imperative (to use Bourdieu’s term) to separate what he calls “higher” minds from what can be implicitly read as “lower” minds. Wordsworth is specific about what constitutes a higher mind; as to what constitutes a lower mind, Wordsworth is fuzzy. Having a higher mind here hinges on a kind of possession— something that can be borne with individuals as their own. This sense of possession could be taken to imply the other, more usual sense of possession— the possession of commodities. The essence of the commodity form is that, despite its ghostliness, it can be possessed. The problem, traditionally, is that possession of commodities engenders the necessity for more commodities. The possession of the “glorious faculty” that Wordsworth enumerates is an end in itself; it engenders no more buying. But Wordsworth’s sense of his audience here is complex, and (to a degree) uncomfortable. Just at the moment where we want to join Wordsworth, we are given the laborious task of figuring out whether or not we “qualify” to stand atop the mountain with him. Whatever “it” is, a glorious faculty or an etherealized commodity, do we have it? To have been transubstantiated into Wordsworth’s body would be to have a vision “thrust forth” upon us, to penetrate and be penetrated; Wordsworth’s has done the labor of representing this experience in such a way that we can read this as a “porous text”; but Wordsworth is not capable of stepping out of the text to inform us of our progress. He is a textual aristocrat; where our own situation as readers is concerned, we must be “self-oracular” about what we have accomplished and what we have not. As a “Peer of consciousness,” Wordsworth has his “glory,” and presumes that its textual manifestation is adequate evidence. But, unlike Byron, it can be argued that Wordsworth never quite looks his readers in the eye. His gaze is deflected upwards, while we direct our gaze upwards to look at him. Thus, the binding that occurs here is both more loose and tighter than the binding Byron creates in *Don Juan*; looser, because less personal, and less audience-aware; tighter, because Wordsworth’s very unwillingness to get involved with his audience engenders (possibly) a greater desire, a more piqued curiosity on the part of the audience both to understand and to possess attainment of what Wordsworth has already attained. Wordsworth’s presentation is drastically less pragmatic than Byron’s; but in some ways it is more unique, less reliant on facility, and more upon a singularity of vision, rather than personality.

Alan Liu calls the Snowdon episode “Wordsworth’s moment of Absolute Knowledge,” but goes on to say that “such knowledge is the knowledge of many things”(447). This seems very reasonable; where the unitary system of *The Prelude* is concerned, Snowdon is the moment when all the strands meet. Wordsworth’s mind is consummated, and we watch it being consummated; as we do so, we are given the opportunity to consummate our own minds similarly. However, it is also arguable that the process by which this happens (especially as pertains to the manner in which we are meant

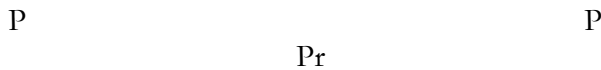
to acquire Wordsworth's knowledge) demonstrates that on only one level is the unitary system not air tight; it does not seem that Wordsworth has Absolute Knowledge of the best way to relate to his audience. The binds linking Wordsworth as protagonist to Wordsworth as text creator here are fitted precisely; but as to the potential Others that Wordsworth is speaking to, all we know is that we are compelled to accept Wordsworth's presumptions and the system he espouses. Liu says that "Wordsworth's vision on the mount is the imagination of empire. Or, rather, we can say that it is the imagination *not* of empire— but with a stress underscoring the overdetermined nature of the negation" (447). Wordsworth is trying not to be despotic, but the system he completes with the Snowdon episode puts him in the position of despot, where his readers are concerned. Yet Geoffrey Hartman saw these issues as germinating from an essential confusion: "the incident is a difficult one to interpret, not only for us but for the poet himself" (60). It is possible that the despotism Liu sees in Wordsworth arises from the difficulties of his position, of having to close his system and open it at the same time. Liu and Hartman seem to agree that, as Hartman said, "Snowdon is a magic mountain" (67). It is the nature of the magic over which they disagree. Hartman seems to take Wordsworth more or less at his word; that the consummation of the poet's mind is real, and that the link between man's mind and nature is secure. The process by which this happens is "naturally magical." The magic Liu sees is more of a disappearing act, where Wordsworth can continue to evade historical forces by a reenactment that redoes them, sideways (but with not dissimilar intentions). Wordsworth wants to *rule*, somehow, and Snowdon becomes the panacea by which he is able to do it.

My own position is that Snowdon is less magical than it is cathartic. It seems reasonable that a system, withheld over a long period of time but held in the poet's consciousness (and that is determinative of what the poet writes), could build up enough force to perpetuate a spontaneous overflow at the appropriate moment. That is one way to look at Snowdon. However, the obscurity and uniqueness of Wordsworth's vision, and the fact that he *is* conscious of his audience, mediates the experience into something more diffuse (and potentially confusing) than a mere catharsis. It is a *mediated catharsis*, complicated by Wordsworth's awareness of an audience that he struggles to find a place for. Whether or not Wordsworth is acting out a despotic impulse may be less important than his awareness that all these impulses are being watched. As such, self-consciousness mediates between his desire to spill the essence of his seminal system out at last and to continually defer until the moment is as perfect and as perfectly set up as possible. It is, in the most general sense (and to resort to a cliché) a labor of love; of *his* love Wordsworth is sure; of *our* love Wordsworth is not sure, and this engenders the fuzziness that makes Snowdon so hard to interpret. If one bind in the system is not operative, the system may collapse; yet Wordsworth has no way to tell if this final bind, poet to audience, is successful. So, Napoleon or not (and certainly part of the system does involve a despotic impulse), Wordsworth is faced with radical insecurity, even at the moment that serves as the hinge of his entire epic endeavor. Wordsworth, like Byron, was writing for a middle class audience; but his non-pragmatism makes his commodity "riskier," in a generally sense, than Byron's was.

WORDSWORTH'S "PRELUDE": WORDSWORTH IN FRANCE



When circumstances take Wordsworth to France in Book IV, we come face to face (though not for the first time) with one level of the reality Wordsworth posits in *The Prelude* — the relationship of the artist to public and private spheres. Wordsworth visits and lives in France at a moment of intense turmoil and transition; the public sphere includes far greater numbers (everyone, in fact, who dares to address the political situation in public) than it usually does, as the fate of the nation hangs in the balance. Everyone is compelled to produce a public self that chooses a side and sticks to it— are you for or against the Revolution? Do you stand with the deposed royals, or with the usurpers? Yet the text is narrated by a first-person (semi-omniscient, in the sense that Wordsworth acknowledges mystery while claiming knowledge of some universal truths, usually personal, rather than political ones) voice, assured and settled, guiding us through these encounters and vignettes from a place displaced from their original context. This particular section of *The Prelude* highlights the manner in which Wordsworth maneuvers between public and private sphere presentations and representations in *The Prelude*. If this textual manner could be made into a diagram, it would look something like this:



Wordsworth, as he presents himself as a wanderer in France, and in earlier, less portentous areas of the text, inhabits a realm of minor public stature. He ambulates, an “infinitely mobile subject” (142), as Langan says, partly to transcend the parameters of time and space, as they “disrupt, intersect, and rupture the desire for formal completion” that is his ultimate, systematic, unitary telos in *The Prelude*. However, Wordsworth’s involvement in the public sphere (as protagonist) complicates as well as informs Langan’s formulation; it is in and from time and space, which chafe against systematic reasoning, that the public sphere takes its energy. The public sphere is (among other things) contingency embodied. Wordsworth, as he travels, as he encounters, must (of necessity) experience the same contingencies that those he encounters do. Even with notions of providence creating a silver lining, Wordsworth’s stature as a minor public figure in these early books hinge on an immersion in realities that Wordsworth is destined to refute by the end of *The Prelude*. Wordsworth is able (ultimately) to refute material realities (as manifested in temporal, spatial, and material dimensions) by retreating into a private sphere realm in which experience becomes text. It is in this private realm that Wordsworth fully realizes not mere contingencies but the negative affect that makes them undesirable. The telos of his textual representations of these contingent elements (that are so constitutive of public sphere life) is to enumerate their full powers to create discordant affect. The text must show what the system, in its unitary reality, is not, before it can be demonstrated what it is. The labor of engaging his audience depends on Wordsworth’s making these representations as poignant and lucid as possibility. It is an appeal to our sympathy, through representation of pain, which Smith discusses in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

Pain...whether of mind or body, is a more pungent sensation than pleasure, and our sympathy with pain, though it falls greatly short of what is directly felt by the sufferer, is generally a more lively and distinct perception than our sympathy with pleasure (65)

Smith was writing out of sympathies that could generally be described as middle class, as Wordsworth was. Smith's sympathies presuppose the time and energy to *have* sympathies: a certain amount of leisure. I call these sympathies middle class not only because they presuppose time and leisure, but that they address issues of equality: Smith seems to be discussing what happens between two members of the same class, rather than sympathy that has in it condescension or ambition. The continuity between Smith and Wordsworth hinges on recognizing that once one has enough material comfort not to be fully occupied with work at all time, one can begin to feel. Where affect is concerned, Wordsworth engages his audience in a way that cannot exactly be called time-worn, but is often conventional nonetheless, and consonant with Enlightenment thought (like Smith's) regarding emotion. Smith is talking (presumably) about one to one, in the flesh encounters; I am discussing how Wordsworth creates text that his audience will encounter. Yet the connection to Smith's moral sentiments holds, as does Wordsworth's Enlightenment-derived humanism. Wordsworth's texts are meant, then, to emerge in the public sphere as commodities, which will have the dual effect of bifurcating Wordsworth from his own direct presence and creating stature as a major public figure. By "major," I mean a public figure whose voice commands respect, prestige, and the power (spiritual, if not material) of an aristocrat. This process valorizes the text-as-presence, validates the reality of text as something real in the world, and creates a completed (and complicated) circuit that allows Wordsworth both to represent contingencies, transcend them, and then present these completed epiphanies to the world. Nowhere is the operation of this circuit more visible than in Wordsworth's approach to his time in France. Wordsworth's ambivalence is present, but held as an interior reality, even as he acts out his minor public role as Revolutionary enthusiast:

Where silent zephyrs sported with the dust
Of the Bastille I sat in the open sun,
And from the rubbish gathered up a stone
And pocketed the relic in the guise
Of an enthusiast; yet, in honest truth...
I looked for something I could not find,
Affecting more emotion than I felt. (IX, 64-71)

Wordsworth's candor here is strategic. He aligns a public stance with contradiction, falsity, and ineffectual action. It is not in the public sphere that he is able to redeem himself; he must take his experiences into a private sphere, in order to recast them as commodities (that may nevertheless evince "priceless" value). The process must be revelatory; the revelation must be of ultimate, non-contingent truth; and gratification must be deferred until the proper textual moment. Battles that are won in the public sphere have, for Wordsworth, a hollowness; they are unrefined, and still partake of the contingency that Wordsworth is fighting. In this particular context, Wordsworth drops the guise of the textual aristocrat and, rather than promulgating "leveling" theories, levels himself (which has the contradictory effect of elevating his position). We do not have to climb to reach Wordsworth at this juncture; he is accessible. However, as *The Prelude* continues, it becomes clear just how strategic this self-leveling is. If Revolutionary France does not, as Liu says, "embody the beautiful" (369), Wordsworth must not betray himself by falling head-over-heels in love with it, either its ideas or its material manifestations. That the Revolution "may be a work of apocalyptic imagination" (Hartman, 245) does not change the fact it is not completely encased and consolidated *in* Wordsworth's imagination. Ultimately, nothing outside of

Wordsworth's consciousness can have the kind of unitary solidity that Wordsworth's own consciousness has (if we accept his self-representations somewhat uncritically, without bringing in McGann's conceptions of romantic ideology). This is the ultimate truth, which for the sake of his unitary thesis, Wordsworth *must* convey. This is a truth that would be difficult to prove in the public sphere, using anything *but* text; speech acts seldom have the efficacy that text does, when its aims are so recondite. These truths and levels, all operative at once, engage the reader by hoping that complexities and convolutions hold interest, rather than engendering mistrust and distaste. Wordsworth's candor often seems strategic; it is arguable that Byron's is, also, but Byron presents his confessions in the form of spontaneous overflows, which sweep unitary realities aside in favor of immediate (and immediately performed) affective ones. The major public sphere presence that Wordsworth ostensibly wants must be turned to good account; everything is subsumed into a system that can (he hopes) take its place as public property, to which readers may freely bind themselves.

It has been posited that Wordsworth, like Byron, created his own kind of irony. Byron's ironies (as will be shown) are rather more overt; they involve the poet telling us the levels and layers of societal, social, and literary corruption he has seen. Wordsworth's ironies are linked to deliberate displacements, whereby signifiers of contingent culture and history are removed from the text, in the interest of promulgating a unitary system of thought, for the reader's acquisition. The ironies manifest when, as Scott Dykstra writes,

...the idealized surfaces of the poet's texts are "ruptured" by moments of ideological self-contradiction and "logical scandal," at which...awareness of historical or political actuality is said to become manifest to the trained eye. (904)

This brings up an interesting point regarding New Historical interpretations of Wordsworth, and our idea of his labor. We do not presuppose to know, when we read Wordsworth this way, whether or not these displacements were intentional. Nor is the question of intention relevant to all readings of Wordsworth. It is relevant to *this* reading of Wordsworth because if they are intentional, then they can be interpreted as part of Wordsworth's labor, the manner in which he attempted to bind himself to his audience. If they are unconscious on Wordsworth's part, then it does not make sense to regard them as part of his labor, especially because it may take a "professional" reader to locate these displacements in the first place. The middle course would seem to be this: to regard the displacements, the manifestations of irony, as part of Wordsworth's plan for *The Prelude*, without taking intentionality for granted. New Historicism does, in fact, seem to fall with some frequency into the "intentional fallacy" that the New Critics argued against. It is also arguable that Wordsworth was writing specifically for "trained eyes," that his labor was for a small number of people ("fit audience though few") who might be amenable to acquiring a new system of thought and feeling. Marjorie Levinson argues that "Wordsworth is most distinctively Wordsworth...in those poems where the conflicts embedded...are most expertly displaced" (4). Levinson sees these displacements as absolutely essential to Wordsworth's identity. The task of the New Historian becomes the revelation of displacements deciphered at last. Whether this is part of the labor that Wordsworth had in mind for his audience to perform is an open question. These issues are omnipresent in the text. The "hunger-bitten girl" episode in Book IX is a case in point:

And when we chanced

One day to meet a hunger-bitten girl,
Who crept along fitting her languid self
Upon a heifer's motion— by a cord
Tied to her arm, and picking thus from the lane
Its sustenance, while the girl with her two hands
Was busy knitting in a heartless mood
Of solitude— and at the sight my friend
In agitation said, 'Tis' against that
Which we are fighting!' (IX, 512-520)

This vignette is presented in a way that seems straightforward. It is a detailed portrait that winds up, as it continues, registering as another providential encounter, but for a slightly different reason than the discharged soldier and the blind beggar. Here, the girl becomes directly a symbol for pertinent, present political realities. The encounter is mediated by an Other, who creates the scenario of a kind of “double encounter.” It is Beauvuy who takes the encounter, situates it in a present moment, and immediately turns it into fodder for revolutionary zeal.

The manifestation of the public-private-public chain formation through which Wordsworth emerges as a professional, representative middle-class poet is highly visible in Book 10, wherein Wordsworth directly addresses the French Revolution and his reaction to it. Several critics have noted that a “direct address,” in a poem known for its convolutions and opaque surfaces, is a revelation in and of itself. This problem (and the dichotomy between direct reference and obfuscation is taken by many critics to be a problem) forms one crux of Alan Liu's argument:

The true apocalypse for Wordsworth is reference. What now shocks us most about Wordsworth's poetry, after all, is its indelible stain of referentiality, its insistent mundanity. We flinch before the topical... as before a devil; we seek ways to textualize it, to exorcise the mundane demon through phenomenal, psychic, or metaphoric displacement (35).

There is a sense in which Liu seems to be answering Geoffrey Hartman, who felt that apocalypse occurs, for Wordsworth, when the mind oversteps the bounds of nature, is alone in a state of being beyond nature, and can no longer naturalize itself. Liu takes Hartman's formulation and makes it pragmatic. Reference, in Liu, is the “going beyond,” the step past the bounds of what is natural, what can naturalize. What these two formulations share is a belief that something is at work in *The Prelude* that is almost (and ironically) occult (in a manner of speaking), a scheme that dictates the composition of the poem, which is meant to be ineffable. The problem for Liu and Hartman is that this scheme is frequently breached. Wordsworth's breaches (manifested, for Liu, in topical allusions) can be interpreted as proof that he cannot live up to his own system, and so the displacements that become visible are chinks in the armor, cracks in a stony façade. One gets the sense, in Hartman and Liu, that great effort has been made to “crack the code,” to demystify the system. However, the system can only be demystified if it is made as entirely visible as possible, which both Liu and Hartman attempt to do. Liu and Hartman are trained (professional) critics, just as Wordsworth was (arguably) “vying for professionalism” in composing this poem. If trained critics are driven to intense irritation attempting to figure out what the system is, what it

means, and how it is being breached, it is easy to see that the unprofessional reader might have a hard time either comprehending or appreciating *The Prelude* (and it is Wordsworth's very incomprehensibility that Byron frequently derided). Wordsworth's compact with a projected audience hinges not only on labor, but on innate ability. Wordsworth wants his readers to have a *feel* for what he is doing. Part of this process involves following the P-Pr-P formulation, the manner in which public Wordsworth becomes private, in order to process data he has collected and "plug it in" to the system; and then emerge again as text-creating (commodity creating) poet, a public figure with something ineffable to sell. This process takes place on a more surface level than Liu and Hartman are looking at; but I would argue that where *The Prelude* is concerned, the surface can be as instructive as the depths. This passage occurs shortly after the beginning of Book 10:

This was the time in which, inflamed with hope,
To Paris I returned. Again I ranged,
More eagerly than I had done before,
Through the wide city, and in progress passed
The prison where the unhappy monarch lay,
Associate with his children and his wife
In bondage, and the palace, lately stormed
With roar of cannon and a numerous host. (38-45)

One does not normally think to associate the word "inflamed" with the Wordsworth of *The Prelude*. If Wordsworth is inflamed, this is one of the final stages of his inflammation, a public jaunt before the Revolution collapses and Wordsworth must go into hiding to rehearse a later, more effectual public presentation of himself. Here, he is mostly anonymous—he "ranges," but does not show anyone reacting to his appearance. But his faith and belief in the cause of Revolution allows him to transcend the atomized isolation that is often associated with Romantic literary figures. His belief, his "at-oneness" with a cause, also separates him severely from what the commonplace of the Byronic hero is—the Satanic, moody outlaw. If the new ministration in France is divine (as Wordsworth initially thought), Wordsworth is content to be a minor angel, affirming where possible, avoiding perceptions that would interfere with his perception of the Revolution. What is important to the structure of *The Prelude*, is that this presentation is, in modern parlance, a "set-up." It is Wordsworth's destiny to plunge from the safety, comfort, and inspiring joy of Heaven into a realm of darkness, out of the public view, where he must build his own way back to heavenly realms, or even create a heaven for himself and his readers. This happens not only through apocalyptic referentiality, but, as Langan says, by "including in the domain of referentiality those elements of spoken and written language exploited by Wordsworth to produce the effect we call 'literature'" (141). It seems that literary composition is another kind of apocalypse, in and of itself. By representing himself, in this passage, as a kind of flaneur (though without the perversity of the Baudelairian flaneur that became manifest roughly sixty years later), and by the fact that we feel we are being *led* somewhere, we see that Wordsworth's system is not just affective, psychological, and intellectual, but *literary* as well. Since literature, in and of itself, stands as a kind of figurative language, a self-consciously literary system may constitute a kind of "breach" away from the system of good faith that Wordsworth insinuates. The literary effects Wordsworth creates are specifically *apocalyptic* effects: setting his readers up for falls, adding sensory data when appropriate occasions arise (prisons, monarch, canons), calmly leading the narrative forward even when obfuscation and

convolution create a surface opacity. It also skirts the obvious to note that the situation Wordsworth witnessed in France was literally apocalyptic; that it convulsed the whole of Europe, and that its aftershocks touched almost everything and everyone that Wordsworth knew. Wordsworth's directness in relating these events makes Liu flinch, but it allowed Wordsworth to speak in the least mediated voice he could muster. The next passage builds in tension and intensity from the first:

I crossed (a black and empty area then)
The Square of the Carrousel, few weeks back
Heaped up with dead and dying— upon these
And other sights looking as doth a man
Upon a volume whose contents he knows
Are memorable but from him locked up,
Being written in a tongue he cannot read,
So that he questions the mute leaves with pain
And half upbraids their silence. (X, 46-54)

Note the literary effects: Wordsworth is crossing a black and empty area, without knowing that his later judgments will show the entire revolution to be a black and empty area. Lucy Newlyn noted that Wordsworth's use of the blank-verse form "kept action to a minimum" (111); here, the action seems deliberately slow (or slower than usual), so that we may grasp the horror of the vignette being offered. One revelation of *The Prelude* is that the voice he is looking for in the mute leaves and the unreadable tongue is his own. The cardinal sin of displacement, for Wordsworth (rather than for Liu and Hartman), is to look outside the self for answers that are already situated in an interior realm. It would be easy to credit this idea with facility, but Wordsworth's belief in interiority is as obfuscated and convoluted as the other parts of his system. In this passage, the initial stage of being public is still being investigated, but there is a note of foreboding, of things being out of place. It is almost ghastly. Wordsworth does not unduly emphasize corpses, but they add to the ambience of the passage, and one can see in them an exterior echo of Wordsworth's hollowness, before he has done the private work of turning sensory data (on all levels of experience) into text.

The shape of the formulation I have presented, that represents the arc of Wordsworth's strategy of appearance in *The Prelude* (P-Pr-P), is necessitated specifically because the first public Wordsworth, walker of Paris and London streets, observer of humanity, prey to encounters, is not deemed adequate to Wordsworth's ambition. Wordsworth's initial public self is not *effectual* in the manner that Lord Byron's was. Had Byron wanted to, he could have wielded real political power; his incredible popularity in the Regency beau monde guaranteed that all his actions would be duly noted by influential people; he was a celebrity, with the rights and privileges of influence that celebrity grants. Byron's textual self is an *extension* of an already developed public persona; Wordsworth starts from a modest position of having little public persona (at least among the general public). By this, I mean that Byron crafted an identifiable textual persona for himself, aided and abetted by his appearances and scandals in society. The Byronic outlaw; moody, brooding, dangerous; was already established as a cultural icon by the time Byron begins the composition of *Don Juan*. This gave Byron considerable advantages in binding his audience to his text. Wordsworth's position vis a vis any public is more tenuous, having less familiarity to rest on— his encounters cannot be deemed providential until he creates textual representations of them; his scruples, enthusiasms, and depressions cannot become

representative until they are turned into text. Wordsworth must formulate a public persona through text, rather than extending something already given, as Lord Byron does. It is to Wordsworth's credit that he openly acknowledges his lack of agency during the period he dwelt in revolutionary France:

An insignificant stranger and obscure,
Mean as I was, and little graced with powers
Of eloquence even in my native speech,
And all unfit for tumult and intrigue,
Yet would I willingly have taken up
A service at this time for cause so great,
However dangerous. (X, 130-136)

Thus, the compact that Wordsworth creates with his readers is one that hinges on the acknowledgement of the process of transformation Wordsworth is enacting— that the second step in the formulation, in which Wordsworth retreats into himself to create representative text, is where Wordsworth finds the effectuality that Byron takes (to some extent) for granted. Wordsworth presents himself as almost a Hephaestus figure— ill-mannered, mean, and inarticulate. “Graced with powers” is specifically what Byron is; not merely powerful but capable of using his powers gracefully. Byron takes for granted that both he and his audience know this. Things are trickier for Wordsworth because he must create a self that his audience will buy. There is nothing “given.” Wordsworth sets these lines up so that a double-sympathy is engendered— we sympathize with his obscurity, and with the desperation of the situation revolutionary France has tumbled into. Wordsworth, in private, crafts a portrait of a courageous interiority, a self that wants to do good in an effectual way but is prevented by circumstances from doing so. We labor along with Wordsworth by imagining how it must have felt to witness France's post-revolutionary destruction and dissolution. There is a sense of *sameness* here that depends on Wordsworth's audience being middle-class; an average middle-class Brit in revolutionary France could not have done much more than Wordsworth did. But the most important facet of these lines is that, from this depth, they lead to an upward trajectory, in which Wordsworth's courageous interiority is developed to an extreme extent (on Snowdon and elsewhere). The private sphere, which is where courageous interiority can become exterior (in text or in speech acts), leads back into a new kind of public life, in which interiority can manifest in the commodity form, that nonetheless takes on the attributes of being priceless. “Insignificant stranger” becomes “significant companion”; “obscure” becomes well-known and accepted. Of course, these are ideal relations, and the fact is that *The Prelude* did not see the light of day until Wordsworth had died, and was not readily embraced by a great number of people on its first release. But the intentionality behind Wordsworth's moves in this section of *The Prelude* do point to a burgeoning, redemptive public self that Wordsworth was crafting out of the ashes of public obscurity.

As this passage continues, Wordsworth pulls a move that is characteristic of his new “public self”: taking the seed of nobility that is in his own self-avowed interiority and developing it. By nobility, I mean Wordsworth's idealism in the face of dashed hopes, his belief in the subsistence of positive dreams and that, even if only on a personal level, they can be realized. These are often expressed in spontaneous overflows, in a kind of mushroom effect, and they require a certain amount of grandiloquence. This is an issue that recalls very exactly what Jerome McGann's positing of romantic ideologies: that, here, Wordsworth

shows unthinking, uncritical belief in his own self-representations. Whether or not Wordsworth did actually feel these things, or whether he is crafting, in private, a textual self who he *says* felt these things during the initial go-round (and who may or may not be aping a representative nobility), leaves the matter open to interpretation. This is where the ideology achieves a maximum level of openness, to acceptance or critique:

Inly I revolved
How the much the destiny of man had still
Hung upon single persons— that there was,
Transcendent to all local patrimony,
One nature as there is one sun in heaven;
That objects, even as they are great, thereby
Do come within the reach of humblest eyes...
...that a mind whose rest
Was where it ought to be, in self-restraint...
Fell rarely in entire discomfiture
Below its aim, or met with from without
A treachery that defeated it or failed. (X, 136-157)

What I see in this passage is not only the displacement that McGann, Levinson, Liu, Simpson, Pfau, and others see in Wordsworth; these seems to be a level of Romantic sublimation going on as well. What I mean is this: Wordsworth's adoption of courageous interiority as a solution to outwardly unpromising circumstances (and his manner of representing this interiority in text) does not merely displace these circumstances; it all sublimates the affect and cognitive dissonance these circumstances generates into a potent psycho-affective force that Wordsworth can harness to use for his own ends. Wordsworth, specifically, harnesses this sublimated energy to make himself effectual, to valorize himself, and to open the process of valorization up to his readers who might follow him along this path. "Inly" must be how this goes, because outwardly, no validation (let alone valorization) is possible. Displacements do not necessarily employ the forces of what or who is displaced; they are, in many ways, a "pure negative." Sublimations, on the other hand, use the accumulated reserves of inward forces that outward forces generate in order to attain other ends— in this case, the cultivation of courageous interiority. Wordsworth's interiority is courageous specifically because he is using accumulated energies that would otherwise have no outlet. If displacement is conscious, as it appears to be here, does it cease to be displacement? Romantic sublimation is in Byron, as well, as we remember that Byron, as an exile, still cares very much about England. But he uses the force of his psycho-affective energy to forge a connection, rather than making a palimpsest. I am not attempting to "displace displacement," but I do feel that the concept can work in tandem with sublimation to achieve a greater modicum of understanding, where *The Prelude* and *Don Juan* are concerned. Even Wordsworth's withholding of *The Prelude* from general release is a kind of sublimation, a strategy to ensure maximum potency at the latest possible date.

The sense of romantic sublimation that follows Wordsworth in Book X hinges on a single conceit— that Wordsworth is able to take the absolute misery of post-revolution France and transform it into something (in his private and privatized consciousness) representative, exemplary and meant for public usage. It is the argument of McGann, Levinson, and other New Historicists that Wordsworth's effort to transcend history (and the culture that goes along with it) is a failed. It seems that, once credit is given to Wordsworth's

attempt to at least *try* to transcend history, he does so by a combination of displacement and sublimation. Sublimation, like displacement, is a private sphere activity. Deconstructionists might argue that text is, in its very essence, consciousness displaced to begin with. In any case, how *The Prelude* is read depends largely on how much credit is given to Wordsworth's attempts at transpersonal and transhistorical transcendence. The binds that attach his audience to this labor can be either positive or negative—we can read *with* Wordsworth or *against* him. In this context, the implications of a negative bind would be an audience which perceives itself to be forced to accept Wordsworth's premises. On some levels, New Historicist engagements with *The Prelude* seem to demonstrate a mixture of positive and negative binds. The manner of New Historicist binding seems purposefully, not negative, but interrogative. It may be useful to attempt an effort to re-interrogate the ways that displacements and sublimations interact. Sublimation occurs when Wordsworth attempts to salvage an air-tight, ineluctable moral lesson from the wreckage:

that tyrannic power is weak,
Hath neither gratitude, nor faith, nor love,
Nor the support of good or evil men
To trust in; that the godhead which is ours
Can never utterly be charmed or stilled;
That nothing has a natural right to last
But equity and reason; that all else
Meets foes irreconcilable, and at best
Does live but by variety of disease. (X, 167-175)

Wordsworth's usage of absolutist words (nothing, all else) points to the force of the sublimations and the displacements going on. The subtle difference between displacements and sublimations is this: displacements are not meant to be overtly visible; it takes a sharp critical mind to see them. It is unlikely that Wordsworth hoped his readers would spot the process of displacement by which material destruction became spiritual creation. Sublimation, however, does not necessarily hinge on things being hidden. Sublimation is a kind of energy transmutation, whereby energy that arises for one purpose can be used for another purpose. I would argue that both sublimation and displacement mark what is going on here. It would seem that Wordsworth would prefer to bind his audience to himself and his poem by a process of sublimation (which does not involve willful obfuscation) than by displacement (which does, or may), though the boundaries between these two forms of textuality can be thin. And all this subterranean activity occurs in the private context of text creation, where Wordsworth must attempt to balance all of these impulses and forge a unitary, complete self to the greatest extent possible. Wordsworth must state overtly exactly what was not the case ("tyrannic power is weak"), because doing so was his way of defeating tyranny. What remains unclear is how many truths Wordsworth subjugated to his unitary system, knowingly or unknowingly. That tyrannic power was *not* weak is demonstrated by the rise of Napoleon, which was in its bloom as Wordsworth was writing this. The issue of "godhead" again brings up the central (and centralized in the text) amorphousness of Wordsworth's religiosity. The question remains: is Wordsworth adopting religious language in an effort to pander to a middle-class audience who he knows may be "bound" by (or to) it? The ambition to be exemplary makes the issue of candor a difficult one to tackle, where *The Prelude* is concerned. It is difficult "across the board": for Wordsworth, for readers, and for scholars today. The idealism of Wordsworth's devotion to "equity and reason" seems to

refute his own experiences, in France and elsewhere. To the extent that many of Wordsworth's spontaneous overflows of feeling, like this one in Book X, do refute Wordsworth's experiences (that are openly and overtly stated), it is not unreasonable to wonder if Wordsworth is trying to bind us to a system that melds idealism and a certain amount of misrepresentation, as well as candor. There is candor (as will soon be shown), but some candor seems subsumed beneath the public sphere text that Wordsworth is creating, both for his own perceived benefit and for the perceived benefit of his audience. This text must, if it is to be effectively public, uphold a façade of idealistic faith.

Candor is, indeed, a major issue in *The Prelude*. To a major extent, candor was what Lord Byron was selling in *Don Juan* (and the singularity of his situation made his candor both entertaining and compelling). One aspect of Wordsworth that disturbed Lord Byron was the sense in which candor was overtaken by a need for systematic unity. If systematic unity is prioritized (and the system becomes the main attraction of the commodity to be sold), then all facts, representations, encounters, and imagery provided must cleave to it. But in some places in *The Prelude* (and Book X is one of them), the circumstances that Wordsworth is writing about force his hand. There is no way to sustain the narrative (especially as it focuses securely on Wordsworth) without engaging in certain personal revelations. These ruptures necessitate candor, as in this passage:

In this frame of mind
Reluctantly to England I returned,
Compelled by nothing less than absolute want
Of funds for my support; else...
I doubtless should have made a common cause
With some who perished, haply perished too— (X, 188-196)

It is true that, as David Simpson says, “these moments record the history of the years around 1800 with extraordinary precision and analytical power, and without any loss of urgency about the claims and aspirations of human feeling” (114). However, the “urgency” that one could glean from this passage is not only directed at transpersonal levels but at personal, material, contingent ones. Wordsworth leaves “reluctantly” (and part of this reluctance can be traced to Annette Villon and her displacement out of this text, though some sexual energy may be thought of as sublimated into the Julia/Vaudracour episode), and in the context of his departure, human feeling is dwarfed by material necessity. WW's public self in France is considered by himself to be a failure— not representative, not exemplary. One subtext is that Wordsworth in France is *not* middle-class, but poor. It will take a middle-class amount of material sustenance for Wordsworth to go into the private sphere and create the public sphere self he desires to create. Thus, Wordsworth is sublimating not only the emotions of the failure of the French Rev, but his own failure to materially sustain himself in its aftermath. But it is the combination of the two levels (sorrow over a national, public situation and sorrow over a public one) that constitute the miniaturized entirety of Wordsworth's system, which flirts both with displacements and with straightforward candor. The use of the word “absolute” creates an interesting parallel: his absolute inability to materially sustain himself, the absolute ability of France to live up to its revolutionary power. It does not, in fact, seem “doubtless” that Wordsworth would have “haply perished”; the entirety of *The Prelude* does not see Wordsworth fight, and his wise passivity and what enable the encounters to occur that teaches him what he knows. It is not in character for the private

sphere Wordsworth, creating a new public self, to speak of his own life in casual terms: it is an instructive “textual leak.”

ADAM FIELED, 2009-2012



Disturb the Universe: The Collected Essays of Adam Fieled

Adam Fieled

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Apologia

The guiding principle of many of these essays is simple: to pierce through the layers of mediocrity, laziness, and bad faith that cover, like a blanket, both the theoretical apparatuses and the textual practices of many modern poets. To an extent, of course, there is a degree of self-privileging at work that I am uncomfortable with: nevertheless, to state my cases in the strongest and most stringent terms necessitated that I privilege myself. A piece like “Century XX after Four Quartets” is broken into its own layers: the central premise, that the second half of the twentieth century saw a precipitous decline in the quality of English language poetry, is buttressed by the conviction that some boundaries between low and high art need to be reinstated. I continue to stand behind these theses, and the other 2010 essays that followed all found different ways to enumerate these conclusions. Let there be no doubt: English language poetry, as an enterprise, has reached a critical juncture. To the extent that experimental poetry is aligned with post-modernism, a new century is testing what durability post-modern theory, praxis, and texts have. What post-modern textuality lacks (spirit, narrative) is becoming significant to a substantial number of poets. The overwhelming reaction that “The Decay of Spirituality in Poetry” received on the Buffalo Poetics List is evidence of this; it was a public spectacle involving poetry and metaphysics, something that has not occurred at any other recent juncture. “On the Necessity of Bad Reviews” is more practical, yet it shares with “Decay” a sense of moral outrage at a poetry world so jaundiced against candor, progress, and distinction that anodyne and pabulum are the only palliatives. There is indeed, I hope, a moral compass at work here—necessitated by the knowledge that the brittle immorality of post-modernity needs to be held in abeyance. “Entitlements: Post-Modernity, Capitalism, and the Threat to Poetry’s History” points to some of the sources of this immorality—to the extent that artistic entitlement is taken for granted (often backed up by capitalistic interest), and history’s “slow time” unacknowledged, all the higher arts will continue to languish.

Post-modern practices enact the sense that devolution is evolution. To the extent that there can be morality in art (and moral imperatives have never been artists’ strong suits), it should be aimed at maintaining, not stability and routine, but healthy instability, a perpetual possibility of combustion in many directions. Post-modernity has seemed to impose, at least where poetry is concerned, a sense of stasis. Early essays like “Loving the Alien” and “Wordsworth @ McDonald’s” comprise attempts to work within static confines; by “The Conspiracy against Poems,” these confines have been assimilated and seen through. Thus, the progression of these essays is a head-on collision with the post-modern—first in complicity, then in confrontation, and finally in a movement towards what comes next. This is the problem that remains with us: what comes next. The answer, I hope, will be found not only in essays but in poems. But legitimate pushes come in all shapes and forms, and it is my hope that these essays have created, for fit audience though few, a context of healthy ferment.

Century XX after *Four Quartets*

(2010)

With the remnants of the twentieth century still surrounding us, it may pay dividends, as the twenty-first century takes off, to take stock of these remnants and begin to make judgments. Newly ended centuries tend to leave detritus; this can create a hostile environment for artists who wish to sew new seeds and blaze new trails. Few seem to remember that when Wordsworth and Coleridge put out *Lyrical Ballads* (though the release and dissemination of this pivotal text spanned the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century), it received hostile reviews and a good amount of indifference, as well. With hindsight, we realize that this was the text that almost single-handedly initiated British Romanticism. The early twentieth century was also inconclusive; William Butler Yeats was only beginning to receive the recognition that would lead to laurel, Walt Whitman's poems were yet to receive the blessings of posterity, while a host of lesser lights congregated around minor poets or reveled in the just-dimming glow of Decadence and Aestheticism. What do we see around us in 2010? It is a poetry world stumbling for direction, still largely lost in the theoretical wilderness of post-modernism, which espouses, among other things, the notion that distinctions between high and low art are both superfluous and illusory, that high art is the imaginary creation of hegemonic white males, and that artists can safely toss history in the dustbin and create out of momentary impulses, that have a better chance of capturing authentic effects than the backwards/forwards time-warp effect that Modernists like Eliot and Pound thought efficacious.

I would like to argue, firstly, that the demarcations between high and low art need to be reinstated. My reasons for this are manifold, but the simplest is this: I do not believe that much English language poetry composed after 1943, the year that Eliot's *Four Quartets* were released, deserves the title of high art. Before I explain why the twentieth century, post *Four Quartets*, was mostly a washout for English language poetry, let me explain what distinctions I believe subsist between high and low art. High art is defined by a sense of aesthetic balance; a host of factors must be present and accounted for; technical competence is a necessity, breadth of vision (so that any narrowness of focus is soon dissipated into fusions with larger wholes), narrative solidity (even when, as in *Four Quartets*, it is a loosely woven narrative, that makes frequent subtle shifts in different directions), and, most importantly, continued serious engagement with serious themes. If this harkens back to Matthew Arnold's emphasis on truth and seriousness, and if this seems regressive, remember that, in poetry, the impulses of post-modernism have all but flushed these constituent elements. Low art impulses often maintain a stance that technical competence is unnecessary, that breadth of vision is too ambitious, that narrative solidity is a remnant of the nineteenth century (and, to the extent that Yeats and Eliot, the only two twentieth century high art poets in the English language, had strong nineteenth century affiliations, this may be the case), and that "seriousness" is an outdated and outmoded concern. So that, the notions of high art and low art have been both displaced and misplaced, with disastrous results. We are surrounded by detritus that attempts too much with too little; that encompasses not worlds but narrow grooves; that shies away from responsible, serious engagements, or courts these engagements with such brow-beating incompetence that the matters were better left alone; and that uses sly evasions to explain its own horrendous deficits.

Back to T. S. Eliot; what is it that makes *Four Quartets* high art, and almost everything that followed in the twentieth century dross? *Four Quartets*, however sententiously, starts from a high ground; the artist is coming to grips with the limitations of living in space and time. Eliot flattens space and time out in the context of an investigation of four places, each with its own peculiar resonances, which birth separate and discrete impulses in the poet, resulting in slight shifts in perspective and emphasis. *Four Quartets* is useful, also, because it demonstrates the loosest narrative emphasis possible in a poem that attempts to achieve

and maintain the durability and permanence traces of high art. Narrative is the backbone of serious poetry; *Four Quartets* has an “I” that dictates terms, but in such a way that “I” is not an obtrusive presence. If there is an imbalance in *Four Quartets*, it is or may be a sense of oscillating perspectives that leads to a less than unitary presentation, or a loose sense of coherence that sometimes meanders away from central points. However, there is a sense that this is redeemed by a spirit of inquiry that balances philosophical concerns with concrete details, fragments of colloquial speech with natural imagery, traces of humanity’s past with visions of possible human futures. That *Four Quartets* spans all this ground does not, in and of itself, make it high art; but that Eliot’s language is taut, sinewy, disciplined, and rich makes the whole of *Four Quartets* ring as a solid, major work of high literary art. If another such work exists that was released between 1943 and 2000, I haven’t seen it.

The Objectivists, the Beats, the New York School (first and second generation), the Confessional poets—what do these poets lack, so that the appellation high art does not affix to their work, nor the appellation high artist affix to them? For many of these poets, it is the ragged lack of discipline in the language of their poems themselves. Trying to read Beat poetry is like trying to eat raw slabs of uncooked red meat. Thematically, the Beats might have been redeemed by an egalitarianism that harkened back to Whitman; formally, they were creators of tremendous Babels that are even now beginning to collapse. The Objectivists did have ambitions consonant with the approach of high artists—but their panoramic viewpoints were undermined by impoverished lines that displayed little heft, music, and which demonstrate, rather than the rawness of uncooked red meat, an overwhelming brittle dryness. The New York School poets evinced significantly more delicacy, thematically and formally, than the Objectivists and the Beats; however, the primary perpetuators of New York School poetry tended to get lost in certain extremes: either language so steeped in colloquialisms that it lost its sense of itself as art, or language so bent against narrative that it lost its sense altogether. Had the Confessional poets widened their scope, they might have gained a sense of consonance with poetry as a high art form—but the narrowness of their thematic scope precluded a sense of serious engagement with issues that transcended the personal. As such, they, along with the Objectivists, the Beats, and the New York School poets, fall squarely under the rubric that covers minor poetry and poets, when placed next to the scope and achievements of Eliot and Yeats. Other groups, like the San Francisco Renaissance poets and the Language poets, seem like a *mélange* and a mish-mash of these styles. Minor Modernists (Pound, Williams, Stevens, Stein) initiated many trends toward disjuncture and colloquialism; because the high art balance of Yeats and Eliot was (and remains) more rigorous and more difficult to achieve, it has inspired fewer immediate imitations.

High art balance, as such, depends on serious engagements with the history of poetry, and also with a sense of discernment. Though Eliot did dote upon some minor French poets, his knowledge of the history of major poetry artists, as expressed in his early essays, was complete and solid. It allowed him vantage points that set his sense of aesthetic equilibrium on a high level. Because he had the discerning impulse to separate wheat from chaff, he could accomplish the major feat of moving poetry forward in innovative ways while also conserving the best of poetry that had come before. Yeats’ engagement with history was no less complete; though he lacked the theoretical bent that defined Eliot, it would have been unthinkable for him not to know the Romantics, the Neo-Classical poets, the Metaphysical poets, Elizabethans, back to Dante, Chaucer, and beyond. Yeats also had a comprehensive knowledge of Irish mythology, which added an ancillary resource to his repertoire. Put simply: these are men that did their homework, on any number of levels. Because they maintained a sense of discipline and responsibility about their traces, moving forward meant taking history into account at each juncture. The idea that history is a flush, that the canon of English language poetry was largely created by and for white males and so has a built-in obsolescence, is pitifully shallow and ultimately pernicious. If this canon is not yet a fully multicultural canon, it is nonetheless an indispensable resource; it is the only true measure we have of how far our own arrows can sail out into the universe. Century XX encouraged poets, after 1943, to eschew the essential challenge presented by Eliot and Yeats; how to move forward and conserve at once. As the twenty-first opens, it is

this dual impulse which again presents itself as our brightest hope to rise to the challenges presented by a rich, if increasingly distant, past.

Entitlements: Post-Modernity, Capitalism, and the Threat to Poetry's History

(2010)

It is a topos that needs to be revisited periodically: capitalism is only a problem for those who have no capital. The brighter bits of Marxism reinforce and attempt to resolve this: a redistribution of goods and material wealth to level societies whose material facets have been skewered towards a chosen few. But the problem with poetry is not factory owners; with so little capital invested in poetry, "ownership" as such is more a spiritual than a material issue. The problem with poetry and poets is that you can't feel the sting of capitalism unless you have no, or little, capital; if you attempt to live off of your poetry (or even as a low-ranking academic) this will almost certainly be the case. Not too many poets have the material shrewdness to earn, through their own efforts, vast amounts of capital; what does happen is that people enter poetry (and the other arts) and are able to do so because of the capital they have inherited. This is more problematic than it appears to be at first—if you can't feel the sting of capitalism (its' greed, lack of justice, spiritual entropy), but have had to expend no effort in casting off the shackles that capitalism imposes, your relationship both to the arts and to society itself becomes so ineluctably warped that you might as well be an alien. In America, we call these folks "trust-funders." Whatever they are called, the attitude they tend to adopt in relation to poetry is one of entitlement; that they are entitled to deem their creations (however meager or nonce) poetry, to adopt an attitude of totalized complacency (without having earned it through genius or innovation), to turn workshops into exercises in egotism and readings into travesties. The attitude of entitlement fits snugly into a post-modern ethos—that art requires a minimum of effort, that any hokey contrivance can, will, and does pass for art, and that the only absolute is simple: capital can and will buy status. That's the post-modern spirit (which is, of course, a blatant oxymoron); to the funded go the spoils. Marxism works for many poets because they've never had the experience of having no capital, so they don't see or feel its dark edges—conspicuous consumption has engendered an ethos of complete indulgence. Entitlement means that, no matter what these poets create, it has to be as good as anyone else's creations: they're as good (of course) as Keats, or Yeats, or Eliot. Post-modern capitalism looks in the check-book rather than the history books to see what the balance is; high numbers take the place of high thoughts.

So the approach that many poets have to Marxism is twice-removed from Marxism in its pure state: by a surfeit of capital, and by a self-satisfaction that accepts and encourages the existent capitalistic system (implicitly, if not explicitly). Poetry becomes a business like any other—if you do good business (manifested in book sales, reading attendance, blog numbers, Google hits, or votes on Goodreads), and if what is quantifiable works in your favor, you are entitled to assume parity with anything or anyone. What is a poet (or an artist) legitimately entitled to? Not much. If you are serious about what you do, if you are not caught in a welter in which post-modern and capitalistic ethos creates a bogus sense of validity, you know that genuine imposition can only be created by history (assuming you are not imposed upon too much by material circumstances). History, if viewed properly, takes back entitlements. The flimsy history created by post-modernity contrives to impose an intimidating veneer; but a lack of real engagement with history creates a sense of the ephemeral which, if not embraced, (and post-modernists do express consonance with the "ephemeral" as such) must be rejected absolutely. Many post-modern equations are simple: "incorporate or perish" is one. What, beyond creating an imposing veneer, constitutes post-modern "incorporation"? Nothing. Post-modernists, for what's often an obvious reason, feel entitled to stop at the surface; the reason is that a persistent sense of entitlement inhibits and destroys human depth. Deprivation often engenders depth—if you have never been deprived, it is difficult to imagine a need for depth. And if you espouse and embrace Marxist levels of material engagement, but fail to connect them to your own existence and begin to take some personal responsibility for it, you become a kind of sham factory owner.

Anyone in the arts who has not inherited funds the way that you have becomes an underling. Underlings can be brushed aside; what begins as warped Marxism becomes straightforward Darwinian obduracy. Simply put, the arts aren't fair, and they never have been. What post-modernity imposes is a context in which there is not only no justice in who "gets in," there is no justice in what they feel they are entitled to do when/if they do get in. What do they feel entitled to do, more often than not?

Post-modernity often seems to represent an infinite regress towards oblivion; a plummet that never ends, and in which any kind of ascension becomes the butt of arrogant laughter; if history and art don't matter, and if you happen to be an artist, satisfaction arises not from what you create but in the sense of entitlement that justifies creating nothing. As much as Marxism is embraced, senses of base and superstructure in this grow confused; there can be no modes of production if what you produce is an acknowledged nothing. One gist of post-modernism is that there is no base—because, we are told, the idea of a "base" in art is a hokey contrivance, and there is no point in actually producing anything (except to preserve appearances.) So why be an artist at all? The reason is simple: because it's easy. Entitlement, if taken to an extreme (as it often is) negates a sense of responsibility. Do whatever you want; who cares? As the flush ethos dictates, check your numbers, throw out some more red herrings, everything's fine. But the depth engendered by deprivation has a difficult time accepting this—and post-modernity, like every other paradigmatic movement in the history of the arts, must end. While there is no sure sign that a nascent depth is going to permanently erode the foundations of post-modernism, it is doubtless that different eras require different artistic modes of production to hold a mirror up to dynamic circumstances. In Western life today, a sense of anti-dynamism, of stasis, has been put in place by harsh economic circumstances. It is likely that the post-modernists will respond to this in the same manner that they responded to fin de siècle entropy—with more acknowledged nothings, bolstered (at times and only in bits) by theories that dictate the shrewd and compelling nature of nothings, to reflect back the nothingness that will have been imposed on us if we have borne the brunt of these circumstances. In other words, post-modernism's potency and efficacy are crippled by the complete material security that enfolds many of its constituents. We need something new right now.

Are any of us entitled to a new movement that evinces more depth and more engagement on more levels? We are not. But to the extent that one seed may be put into place (and with the hope that the seed may grow), I will say that what we need is to move upwards, towards some kind of affirmation, rather than towards new and greater levels of oblivion (born, more often than not, from obliviousness). Those who have inherited money often inherit nothing from history; those who have to create their own lives may create something worthy to be inherited, that has consonance with the more developed moments in art's history. In this context, the important thing is that nothing is to be closed, and what is created is a mystery that each artist must resolve for him or herself. No one should be entitled to anything but the right to create; the world owes none of us anything, not even this. That the right to create should be earned is something that post-modernity has completely lost touch with; that material wealth is, itself, a red herring where the arts are concerned is something that needs to be looked into. But if something is to rise, and shortly, from the ashes of a fading post-modern regime, let's hope that when/if we have earned our places, it is because we know that in art, there is no way to earn anything but through intense and devoted labor.

On the Necessity of Bad Reviews

(2009)

The attitudes prevalent in the poetry world today have created an atmosphere in which bad reviews of poetry books are (for the most part) unacceptable. The phenomenon of the poetry review-as-puff-piece takes place in a wide variety of contexts—online journals and blogs, print journals, press releases, and anthologies. The poetry protocol of gathering positive quotes to use on book jackets fits squarely under this rubric. I would like to opine that this trend, which encourages clannishness, reinforces coterie affiliations, and establishes poetry as a lightweight art-form, is largely negative and needs to be changed. Even popular music contexts encourage more healthy debate, where aesthetics are concerned, than poetry does. Aesthetic debates in poetry tend to be “my group against your group,” a struggle for uncontested hegemony, rather than the productive arguments that initiated movements like British Romanticism and Modernism, and resulted in stunning new work. “Soft poetry culture” necessitates that interviewers ask easy questions, older poets are surrounded by fawning sycophants, while younger poets jockey for position based on their connections and alliances. For poetry to become a culturally heavyweight art-form again, poets (especially the ones being nurtured in MA and MFA programs) need to be taught to question their teachers, challenge poetry systems, and (perhaps most importantly) to write both good reviews and negative ones. The poetry world suffers from a dearth of angry young men and women, of rebels and revolutionaries. The first question that arises from these assertions is a crucial one—if “soft poetry culture” is predominant, how and why did it become this way? The answers are complex and myriad—nevertheless, a tentative investigation may be fruitful if it is agreed that these issues are, in fact, issues, and important ones.

Most poets in this day and age have some affiliation with academia. If you are reading a modern poet’s book, there is a very good chance that the poet has not only a university degree but an advanced degree (usually an MFA or MA) as well. The relationship between poetry and academia has become so entwined that it may no longer be worthwhile to investigate whether or not this basic association itself is healthy or unhealthy. What, exactly, are poets being taught in these programs? Programs vary widely, and it would be absurd to generalize; nonetheless, I have both an MFA and an MA, one from a conservative institution, one from a liberal institution. This puts me in a unique position to comment on this situation. I do so, enjoining the caveat that I welcome both commentary and dissent, and that there may or may not be representativeness to my experiences. I have found conservative and liberal poets to be roughly 70% similar; they tend to credit themselves with much more differential than is actually there. Both sides cling very closely to coteries and coterie affiliations; both tend to encourage their students to accept their pronouncements uncritically. In my experience, poetry teachers at this level tend to only use “hardness” (hard pedagogical techniques) to keep others soft. Soft poetry culture dictates a strict master/servant relationship in these contexts—masters can be as hard as they want, servants (students) must remain soft. In more exacting disciplines (the natural sciences, for example), this division is more necessary—answers can be proven, things need to be learnt. But in art, which has as its ontological foundation what might be called “total subjectivities” (no one can prove what works, what does not, and even master narratives often come down to people’s opinions), master/slave dynamics are not only unproductive but actively unhealthy. Liberal poets, I have found, are 30% more genuinely liberal than conservative poets, and 70% as pigheaded, domineering, and coercive. Investigation of these issues becomes like playing with Russian dolls; opening up one issue leads directly to the discovery of another one. What leads poetry teachers in these programs to disseminate soft poetry culture through hard tactics? If it has the effect of softening sensibilities, why do sensibilities need to be softened?

I wrote, in a preface to *Ocho #11*, that poetry is a tough gig, and it is. Material rewards are scarce, competition is fierce, and tremendous dedication is required to even get a foot in the door. Those who have the good fortune to become successful in poetry tend to be warped by the atmosphere of deprivation that surrounds poetry endeavors. The line between those who are successful and those who are not can be thin indeed. Poets are fiercely protective of their little domains (and they usually are very little indeed), and this fiercely protective instinct gets enacted by a process and an impulse not unlike what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “demarcative imperative.” Those who are above are forced by ambiguous circumstances to say they are above, and to enact this superiority. Students must be softened into receptivity—a student reacting to hardness with hardness would be an impermissible threat, in a radically unstable, ambiguous context. This is how soft poetry culture is perpetuated—through the hardness of teachers. And it is through teachers that students often obtain their first publication opportunities. Thus, young poets become “foot soldiers” for their teachers—they are soft meat, determined to carry the torches that have been passed down to them. Because so many poetry contexts are predicated on regionally or aesthetically dominant coteries, to break out of these rigid structures is a task indeed, and one younger poets are not encouraged to undertake. “Toe the line,” goes the master narrative that dictates so much of younger poets’ behavior, “and you will be rewarded; expressions of individualism will lead to irreversible exile status. It is softest (and most rewarding) to conform.”

Textual expressions of conformity often take the form of puff-piece reviews. In an unspoken fashion, this becomes a mode of “playing the game,” which necessitates perpetual softness. It also must be noted that “screaming at the other side” (who may or may not be listening) of the liberal/conservative, experimental/mainstream divide does not necessarily qualify as hardness. It reinforces a poet’s own coterie associations, and is often used as a tactic to draw attention to one’s self. Honest looks at those within one’s own domain are hard to come by, and this fact prohibits poetry from becoming as rigorous (formally and thematically) as it could be. Students beaten into softness are so terrified of losing their little places that criticism of what immediately surrounds them would be unthinkable. Combat (perverse as this sounds) needs to start at home; conflict and warrior skills should not merely be aimed at distant enemies. Conflict within coteries should be encouraged; individualism needs both to be espoused and practiced by teachers. Taking this a step further, the question remains as to what a more ideal (or “heavyweight”) poetry world would look like. Why would, not a dominant strain of bad reviews, but a balance of good and bad reviews, inject new life into an art-form that many people have given up for dead?

Young artists need to have teeth, bite, and guts. To the extent that young artists are being taught that teeth, bite, and guts (and I will resist the temptation to get academic with these words, as commonsense definitions apply) are negative, undesirable attributes, the poetry world looks (at least from a distance) like a realm of stilted pabulum. Non-poets tend to think of poetry as boring; it often is. Artists that work in other mediums actively employ the works of canonical poets, while eschewing works of contemporary poets, for a simple reason: because contemporary poets are not good enough (this applies to everything from R. B. Kitaj’s usage of Eliot to Lady Gaga’s fascination with Rilke). Older poets have had their shot; the decades to come may show to what extent they have or have not succeeded in their endeavors. But the real fate of modern poetry is in the hands of younger poets, who (whether they realize it or not) do have options. One healthy option to explore is the possibility that an approach grounded, not in softness or hardness alone, but in a balance of softness and hardness (as manifested both in poems and in reviews), would be conducive to the growth of healthy, diverse poetry contexts, which could transcend the usual coterie prejudices. As a final confession, I will say this: I have written my share of puff-pieces. But the time has ended in which I can do this in good conscience; and to the extent that I feel writing negative reviews could, in some sense, be productive, I will be willing to get the hatchet out.

Wordsworth @ McDonald's

(2005)

With the advent of the Information Superhighway, cell-phones, and other Digital Now-signifiers, we have entered an era in which all reality is virtual. Poets who give serious thought to the why of their craft are faced w/ a dilemma: how to create poems in the Wordsworthian manner (i.e. real language of people) when technology has outmoded the Romantic model that still dictates so much serious poetry. Language poetry schematized a new model—oblique, skewered, post-modern. This model was a useful innovation that has, in roughly thirty years time, grown stale and somewhat irrelevant. Poets, & what's left of their audience, still want the Wordsworthian model to hold. They want feeling to be relevant & language to enact a mimesis of interior (real) processes. The problem is, that if we acknowledge a central virtual quality to modern life, real language may be an impossibility.

So, we can't depend completely on Wordsworth anymore. For the creation of virtual poetry, it will be necessary for the poet to internalize things ordinarily seen as epitomizing crassness & "low" reality—like McDonald's. As one sits in McDonald's circa 2005, it becomes clear that agile minds are working to keep the corporate axles greased—minds from which it is possible to learn. Hanging in the window, a large picture advertising chicken strips; a young African-American male dangling one in front of parted lips, beaming; inscribed on the blank space above his head, a motto: "I'm lovin' it". This is obviously rhetorical, in that the "I" here is general & universalized. "I" is all of us, in the contented bliss of a chicken-strip meal. So, McDonald's is subtle enough to posit an "I" that really means "you". How many poets left in America can say the same? How many poets are so subtle, so engaged, so virtual that their "I's" resonate as "yous"? Poets want a perpetual striking of Wordsworth's bell; they still believe in "real language" (even Language poets inherently must believe before they deconstruct); their "I's" stay isolate, separate, derelict. Let's set up a small chart & enumerate exactly the binary being portrayed here:

Wordsworth (language/ real men)
gender-specific, un-PC
(language/men) static/abstract
definitely serious-intentioned

McDonald's (I'm lovin' it)
gender-neutral, PC
(I) "I" In medias res
moderately serious

Immediately it becomes apparent that the McDonald's ad execs are, on some level, more linguistically sharp than us, the poets. Their motto is PC, active, & moderately serious, where Wordsworth is sexist, static, & excessively serious. What I'm calling for is a poetics equal parts Wordsworth & McDonald's. Post-modernists would resolve this binary tension by making a mockery of it (especially the Wordsworth half), in an attempt to reinforce an ethos of "virtuality" or "nothing real". Though reality has grown to be (arguably) virtual, I am looking for an earnest attempt to implement both sides of this binary, the Wordsworth & the McDonald's, the "I" that's "I" & the "I" that's "you", the static & the active, definite & moderate seriousness. This does not preclude irony & slant; rather, they become a tool to express underlying profundities. What's needed to achieve balance is Negative Rhetopoeiac Capability. That is, a poem must attempt to straddle the Wordsworth/McDonald's binary without irritably grasping after rhetorical reason, or making a mockery of either side. This ensures a poetics both actively virtual & substantially real.

Some of these Frank O'Hara bits are illustrative of successful work in this vein:

I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and

casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with
her face on it.

Leroi comes in
and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12
times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop
a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible
disease but we don't give her one we
don't like terrible diseases.

O'Hara's conversational diction fulfills Wordsworth binary-end, even as his affirmative, ebullient voice veers into "I'm lovin' it" territory (in medias res, active, performative). This is "serious ephemeral" poetry, using Pop Culture references as quotidian signifiers that nevertheless have substantial internal ("felt") relevance. O'Hara, though he skirts post-modern (or "Pop") territory, does not make a mockery of anything—he's kidding, but he isn't, he's at McDonald's reading Wordsworth, he is where we want to be.

O'Hara's oeuvre as a whole is useful, because O'Hara has a key "Wordsworth McDonald's" quality that most serious poets lack—"charm". His poems, in their moderately serious/actively engaging tenor, are charming. Why wouldn't Wordsworth at McDonald's be charming? Can you imagine the Bard of Tintern Abbey reckoning a "Solitary Milkshake", finding himself overwhelmed by a spontaneously felt Big Mac? O'Hara's charm comes from unexpected juxtapositions charged w/ feeling. He is, in this sense, a good Wordsworthian—but he lives in the present moment, always. Dualism is manifested as whim. Modern signifiers are internalized, processed, felt. So, McDonald's has led us from Wordsworth to Frank O'Hara, who was virtual before virtual became real. He instinctively navigated a Mannerist-space that has yet to be pursued by a substantial number of serious poets (who perhaps mistrust his merely moderate seriousness). Yet, poets who lean & cling to Wordsworthian "reality" can often be heard complaining about lack of interest. Poets who want to achieve something real in this day & age really have no choice but to get Mannerist. Mannerism is differentiated from Pop (and the post-modern ethos that followed in its' wake) in this way—Pop is a Campbell's Soup can, Mannerism is a Campbell's Soup can held by Michelangelo's David. Mannerism includes Formal Rigor, depth, gravitas (Wordsworth virtues) along with spontaneous, active, Pop-based signifiers and imagery (McDonald's).

Claiming an essential virtuality to modern life needs some justification. What I mean to say is that image/technology-saturation has become so rampant in Western society that even those of us who'd like to lead pure, uncluttered, Wordsworth-style existences have cell-phones, use the Internet, watch TV & movies, etc. Cell-phone communication seems particularly distressing, substituting expedience for intimacy (transpiring as it does while we are "multi-tasking"), breaking down boundaries (anyone w/ our number can reach us anytime, so long as we keep our phones on), often poisoning our relationship to the Now by taking us out of the present moment. So, imagine—one is at a dinner party, adjourned to the living room to watch (if we are lucky) something by Cocteau or Godard. Our cell-phone rings; we're expecting an important (perhaps career-related) call; we answer. We are living in three realms—dinner party, Cocteau, cell-phone—at once. These situations have become familiar and common to most of us. They happen all the time, and they (for me at least) have added up to a feeling of alienation from the essential presence of the Now. This is especially pertinent for city-dwellers. The unreality/virtual component goes way up, it's hard to feel solid with a flux not only in the outside world but in one's hand-bag and one's computer. When I speak of an encroachingly preponderant virtual world, that's what I mean.

Poets must address this situation precisely. When Wordsworth, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, spoke of "gross stimulants" contaminating mass aesthetic judgment, could he even have fathomed our current level

of emotional dispossession and image-centered “savage torpor”? I’m all for a poetry that confronts this head-on by using some of it! The architect Robert Venturi says, “Viva Mannerism that richly acknowledges ambiguity and inconsistency in a complex and contradictory time.” Maybe we could go so far as to call O’Hara a “Mannerist”—his exaggerated reactions and humor, his implicit ethos of “mess is more”. McDonald’s “I’m lovin’ it” also has the essential Mannerist hyperbolizing spirit. Wordsworth, the sober, steady philosophe, was obviously no Mannerist—but why not keep some of his level-headed piety regarding art’s pleasure-giving, insight-shedding mission, his emotion-cherishing mind?

To me, it’s a question of letting in. Don’t write off McDonald’s for its’ Mannerist modernity or Wordsworth for his Romantic self-absorption—rather, let them both in equally, so that what we produce is contemporary and durable, Mannerist and tradition-preserving, face-to-face intimate and cell-phone expedient. O’Hara was, as far as I can tell, the greatest master at absorbing modernity-signifiers in such a way that he represented them without condescension, and with a loving eye. This has obvious ties to Warhol, Pop-art in general, Rauschenberg’s Combine-paintings, etc. Mannerism, however, has grounding in tradition that Pop lacks. Pop did away with the past in embracing glossy surfaces; Mannerism wants the glossy surface and the earthy depth. It’s an impossibly ambitious stratagem for a new urban poetics—but why not?

Loving the Alien

(2006)

Poetics involves both “transcription” and “recollection”, exteriors internalized and interiors exteriorized. Each process involves the assimilation of interior and exterior elements, “the ineffable In of Out and Out of In”. Maybe we could call this point of in/out convergence meta-rational. We recognize the “rightness” of Out becoming In and In becoming Out, but we don’t know exactly how or why it happens. Pursuant to this, it’s possible to construct a neat little binary from the compositional theories of Jack Spicer and William Wordsworth. On the one hand, we have Spicer, “spooky” California poet maudit, with his transcription theory—everything worthy to be written is “dictated” by an unknown (alien) Other. On the other hand, Romantic man-of-Earth Wordsworth posits a poetry of recollection (introspective and otherwise). Wordsworth’s famous “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” is ancillary to this. Yet, if we throw Jack and William into a dialectic blender, we see that each theory leaves something unaccounted for; transcription must be done from an inside (with what Spicer calls “furniture”, whether the space is den or living room apparently doesn’t matter), and recollection must be inspired by outside things (Tintern Abbeys or Candlestick Parks, numinous or sub-numinous things-in-themselves). It becomes clear that Wordsworth and Spicer fit together like puzzle pieces, but the puzzle is larger than them.

Certain things seem apparent. If we “transcribe”, it’s because we feel the Martians have something worth saying (else why would we do it?) Let’s call this “Martian empathy”. The Martian isn’t strictly Other, but is both potentially comprehensible and definitely social; “transcription” is, in a sense, “recollection” of our interactions with the Martians. The dialectic knot tightens and the meta-rational comes into play again; we feel the “rightness” of the interaction without seeing how it is or isn’t logically determined. Conversely, “recollection” is transcription of outside things (persons or the inanimate Natural forms Wordsworth loves), what they’ve “told” us merely by existing in the manner they do. This is the “language of voiceless things”, not Martians but certainly things that aren’t “given” to human consciousness, things that can only be “seen into” with conscious effort. Because the experience is heightened and changed during the compositional process, “recollection” is also meta-rational. The raw experience is “charged into life” by being put in verse, by the “spontaneous overflow” that may or may not have been felt at the “encounter point”, but which is discovered in recollection (“mind associating ideas in a state of excitement”). What transcription and recollection share is the experience of the alien becoming familiar in a moment of meta-rationality.

Spicer’s poem “Thing Language” bears this out:

This ocean, humiliating in its’ disguises
Tougher than anything.
No one listens to poetry. The ocean
Does not mean to be listened to. A drop
Or crash of water. It means
Nothing.
It
Is bread and butter
Pepper and salt. The death
That young men hope for. Aimlessly
It pounds the shore. White and aimless signals. No
One listens to poetry.

Spicer uses “ocean” as a metaphor for the vast universal body of poetry, “art-language”. There must be some “recollection” here—that the ocean is “tougher than anything” is a subjective pre-value judgment, obviously born out of lived (“recollected”) experience. The only way to know how tough the ocean is is to swim in it! Spicer’s poet-life, rather than his Martian-encounters (however indistinguishable the two may seem to him) allow him the luxury of this large, authoritative utterance. He’s “recollecting in tranquility” the tumultuousness of the creative process. Any feeling of a “beyond-Jack” speaking through him would not be distinguishable to even a preternaturally close reader. Likewise “no one listens to poetry”, a maxim meant rhetorically with years of hard poet-living behind it. The Martians, should they have dictated this to him, would’ve been telling him what he already knew (and had worked into gist-rhetoric) before. Tinges of Mannerism here, “I’m lovin’ it” grandiosity transposed into a minor key (and intermixed with a few flatted fifths)—the exaggeration of “tougher than anything” and “no one”. The poem fits in so well with what Spicer said in his lectures (poetry as meaningless conglomerate of contingencies, not for pleasure, essentially a negative apparition), that one feels the presence of a hyper-personal “schtick” that Spicer developed in all areas of his literary practice. The hyper-personal is what Spicer wanted most to avoid, maybe because he knew that it’d be impossible. The boundaries between “Zen emptiness” and hyper-personality are paper thin—both are exaggerated (“Mannerist”) states, extremes. The “ocean”, seen in its’ totality, has a “blankness”—the subject objectifying the ocean, on the other hand, has only his developed sense of self (“personality”) with which to counter (or reflect or balance) the blankness. Spicer isn’t in the poem but directly behind it, which is really just as visible. The bind of ineluctable “Self-hood” was familiar to him, “transcription” being the surest antidote. Yet the obvious preponderance of recollection (at least in “Thing Language”) makes the entire intellectual construct behind “transcription” seem strained.

On to W. W. Here’s his famous short poem “A slumber did my spirit seal”:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

First, a digression...one way “transcription” is supposed to happen is through metaphor. The spirits “told” Yeats (in the anecdote delivered by Spicer in his lectures) “We’re giving you metaphors for your poetry”. That would be a good “furniture arranging strategy”, no? Wordsworth’s poem is (it seems to me) essentially metaphoric—“slumber” is a metaphor for lover/love interest (possibly “Lucy”, could be anyone), revealed in third-person signifying “she” used from the third line on. A love affair, or “being in love”, awakens us on certain levels, on others “puts us to sleep”. So, while part of the poem is “recollection” (Wordsworth is talking, albeit metaphorically, about a relationship he’s had), in using “slumber” as abstract personal pronoun (highly unusual for him), one could argue that Wordsworth was mitigated by Martian influence, i.e. he was transcribing a metaphor the Martians gave him.

The difference that leans me towards Wordsworth’s base position (poem-as-recollection) is that, while the metaphor used in this poem might be Martian inspired (transcribed), everything else about it (its’ tone, form, subject and object) came from Wordsworth’s furniture (recollection-material). Both transcription and recollection are often operative in poetry, but recollection is both more necessary and more ubiquitous. Poets write about what they know about and what they know about is their furniture. Spicer’s error was to choose the metaphor of something inanimate (furniture) for what is actually most animate in the poet’s

consciousness. This is what we can classify as all “recollection material”—thoughts, feelings, dreams, whims, etc. Transcription becomes problematic if the Martians have to deal with reactive, rather than inactive material. Not that Spicer’s perceived Other isn’t a provocative thought—it is—just that Wordsworth’s ideas have superior grounding and superior relevance. You can get away from transcription anytime you like (maybe even use your favorite lines), but recollection is unavoidable. This begs the question that each poet must answer for him or herself—to what extent should Martians be sought? They do seem to have some good ideas.

The Decay of Spirituality in Poetry

(2010)

Artists that live in the western world in this day and age are often forced to confront dominant strains of materialism, greed, and capitalistic interest. To an extent, poets get the worse end of this bargain—unable to make a living from their work, forced to support themselves by means that might be distasteful to them, surrounded by influences that anathematize the values they hope to embody. Yet poets, like everyone else, are themselves dominated by social interests which make the interests of those around them difficult to avoid. We must live in society; not only that, but because we must subsist through means that are not (for the most part) generated by our work, we must participate, to a greater or lesser extent, in the materialism, greed, and capitalistic interests that run rampant through the majority of the population of the respective societies we inhabit. The chameleonic tendency of poets (and of artists in general) has been widely noticed; unfortunately, many poets take on stripes that sully the spiritual essence of the duties they perform when they compose. We cannot shut the world out, but by letting it in we corrupt ourselves; this has always been true of poets and other artists to some extent, but it is especially so in 2010. Even as the Internet has revitalized certain aspects of poetic practice, the forces of greed have grown more extreme as recession has swept Europe and the States, making resources scarce and even minor material gains hard-won. It is not surprising, then, that strains of materialism prevalent in western societies have infiltrated poets' texts. What are these strains, and how do they operate?

The theories of Karl Marx have exerted a powerful influence on the few preceding generations of experimental poets, but it is a more ambiguous influence than has been generally noticed. Because Marx espouses the replacement of capitalistic materialism with another kind of materialism (the material domination of the working classes), what we have in Marx is a kind of meta-materialism, that feeds on itself, with anything transcendental presumed guilty until proven innocent. Poets that subscribe to Marxist tenets have political agendas; poetry becomes an agent to fight capitalism. But this poetry still has its intellectual roots in a materialism that is more or less complete. That there might be other aspects to reality than the material; that consciousness is vaster than merely material perceptions can encompass; that the transcendentalism that would ascribe to the visible world an incomplete-at-best importance; these schemas, often dismissed as Romantic and thus regressive, are denied outright. What is, is—poetry that seeks to affirm this wants to embody text as a sole agent, a kind of material, that can, of its own essence, create worthwhile, substantial, memorable poems. It would be precipitate to assert that there is no spirituality whatsoever in the poetry of the American Language poets, for example: but that this spirituality is one that denies that “spirit” is, in all its ontological nebulosity, an important agent in poetic practice, would be difficult to deny. Poets with Marxist leanings bridle at words like “soul” and “spirit”; they perceive these words as tokens of delusion, demonstrations of an inability to face the concrete realities of the world and thus to have contemporary efficacy. Looking beyond Marx, some generations of experimental poets have also sought to embody the relationship to language initiated by the Deconstructionists of the late twentieth century. This consummated relationship is, I feel, less a success (and I do believe the Marxist poets understand Marx) than a misunderstanding.

There is, I believe, a spiritual essence inherent in Deconstructionist philosophy that is often ignored. The Deconstructionists, with, among others, Jacques Derrida, leading the pack, saw in language a kind of dissolution of subjectivity, a movement subjects could make from unitary realities to realms that encompassed more than subjectivity alone could hold. It would be amiss to ascribe any kind of transcendental aim to Deconstructionism, especially where subjectivity is concerned; and there exists a chance that Deconstructionists might have been even less comfortable with words like “soul” and “spirit”

than Marxists were. But that language itself is an arbitrary system leading to an infinite regress, balanced with the realization that words are tactile objects that are capable of containing, in their infinite admixtures, entire worlds; can, potentially, lead to a relationship with language that has a more than invisible connection to realms of subjectivity and transcendental engagement than is commonly supposed. The notion of Romantic Deconstructionism is absurd; but that Deconstructionism does not necessarily negate all forms of transcendental engagement has been misunderstood by experimental poets, who seek to evacuate all hints of anything transcendental from their texts, seemingly forgetting that poetry and philosophy serve very different functions, and fulfill very different ends. To be short: just as there is a lexicon that serious philosophers have a right to use (and this formulation is, admittedly, rather overdetermined), there is a lexicon that poets have a right to use, and the inheritance of words like “soul” and “spirit” from our forefathers is a worthwhile one. Certain poets have used Deconstruction as a pretext to shun a serious, responsible engagement with the history of poetry; beneath their decimating gazes, centuries have been emptied of worth and meaning, and little fads of disjuncture and paratactic repetition have taken root as valuable. Without calling for a precise return to the Romantic, poetry needs to derive what spiritual seeds there are from Deconstructionism (and they are considerable, though they may have been unintended as traces), not to evade the serious tools that poets toil with to create meaning: narrative, the body, human relationships, and the levels that trace all of these things, horizontally and vertically.

I do not presume to demonstrate that poets do or do not have “souls.” What I will say is that the metaphysical is part of our inheritance that needs to be reengaged. It is not only an efficacious way of connecting ourselves to our forefathers; it is an efficacious way of doing something more urgent, and more necessary: through these investigations, we can begin the work of separating ourselves from the debacles of capitalism, now that it has subsumed so much of the western world. There is a level on which we are shying away from a direct engagement with the materialism of our respective societies by doing this; but that our narratives may draw from both levels, from an engagement that is also a disengagement simultaneously, has not yet been explored to a great extent. I foresee a return to spirituality that is not merely (or entirely) a rejection of Marxist and Deconstructionist thought, but a hybrid that uses all of these elements to make larger mosaics; poems that read like the great literary narratives that have sustained literary communities for centuries, from Dante to Goethe, from the British Romantics to James Joyce and T.S. Eliot. This, that I envision, is not a return but a movement outward into something more expansive, more developed, and more encompassing than anything that was created by an English-language poet in the second half of the twentieth century.

Anything with an Edge: Rethinking Post-Avant

(2009)

Many definitions have been posited for post-avant. There was a flurry of action about five months ago, in which I and a handful of other poets had it out over what post-avant means and what it does not. It was my impression that no general consensus was reached, and that much had been said but little of it had a substantial impact. This goes, certainly, for the things I said too; I do not privilege my own formulations here. Nonetheless, I think the discussion is a worthwhile one, and thinking about it has led me to some new conclusions. Here is the original definition I posited for post-avant: the diasporic movement of Lang-Po towards a new synthesis with erotic and narrative elements. That's roughly it. What I have been thinking over the last week is slightly different, and simpler. It is defining post-avant poetry as anything with an edge. This begs some immediate questions. What do we mean when we say that a poem, or a book of poems, has an edge? How do we strictly define edgy poetry? Colloquially, if it is said that something has an edge, it usually denotes that it is pointed, direct, sharp, and that it skirts the uncomfortable or the unsettling. It may deal, thematically, with a difficult issue, or it may take an unusual stance on an issue that has become stuck in a rut of settled representations. One obvious historical example would be Shakespeare's sonnet My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun..., which takes Petrarchan conventions and turns them on their heads. Or, the way Pound conflates two seemingly irreconcilable disparates in In a Station of the Metro, creating an unlikely synthesis of urban and rural imageries. Perhaps, owing to the sophisticated games played in his sonnets, we could call Shakespeare the first post-avant poet. Why not?

What else is edgy, pointed, direct, and sharp? I might be useful to name some things that are not edgy, but that tend to bear the post-avant moniker. Lazy disjunctive writing is, for me, not post-avant, specifically because it has no edge. Having an edge necessarily connotes making some kind of sense. It is hard, actually, to have any kind of thematic element included at all, if you do not make any narrative sense. I have no intention of picking on anyone in particular, but we all know lazy disjunctive writing (most of us know it a mile away) and it is not difficult to see that by this new definition, it does not fit under the rubric of post-avant. Epiphanic poetry, anything that relies on sentiment, would obviously not be post-avant, in these terms. How about spoken word poetry? That is a tough nut to crack; good spoken word poetry certainly has an edge, certainly carries thematic elements, so it would be hard-going to deny it a place in post-avant. What needs to be discussed is how stringently standards of formal rigor are applied to post-avant. If no standards are applied, someone could get onstage at a reading and say shit fuck piss ten times and be post-avant. All those tired arguments about "serious" poetry versus "performance" poetry need to be dragged out of the closet for the thousandth time; we have to find ourselves making distinctions and setting boundaries that might be unreal. I have no intention of laying down my version of the law; but where performance poetry is concerned, inclusion under the aegis of post-avant cannot, I think, be taken for granted. Which may, unfortunately, invalidate the anything with an edge tag-line. Or maybe not. The beauty of dealing with a new movement is that it is still amorphous and, if you are lucky (which I may or may not be), you can do your bit to shape it.

I affixed a picture of Frank O'Hara to this post because (perhaps this is a bit obvious) anything with an edge follows directly from going on your nerve. Why is it that O'Hara (along with few others) gets respect from both major sides of the American poetry landscape? How is it possible to be loved by both Billy Collins and Language Poets? There are myriad reasons, but I would say that a major one is the deft manner in which O'Hara creates narratives that have an edge. New York City created O'Hara just as surely as Paris created Baudelaire; O'Hara's version of Negative Capability meant creating poetry that mirrored, as precisely as possible, the edginess of New York street-life mid-century XX. If O'Hara was a kind of conduit, this was

facilitated by the seeming impetuosity of his poems. Is "anything with an edge" impetuous? Not necessarily. But the element of conscious craft and "edginess," taken as an indicator of aesthetic worth, make uneasy bedfellows. On the other hand, the tension between uneasy bedfellows can make for interesting poetry. There is no way to seal this thing up in one post (and blog-posts are often themselves "go on your nerve" exercises); but I think the idea of post-avant and anything with an edge could lead to a fruitful discussion, especially because it gets boring writing a diasporic movement... over and over again. I have always felt that O'Hara's best poetry started something that has not yet been finished. How would O'Hara feel about potentially having started a movement? Well, he did Personism already, so technically this would be the second movement...the more (I hope he would say) the merrier! I hope to go into what constitutes "edginess" and "anything with an edge" in days to come.

Book Review: Jordan Stempleman's *Facings*

(2008)

When comparisons regarding poetry and poets become an issue, it is easy to remember a cliché that, in the manner of the best clichés, always seems applicable: comparisons are odious. Yet comparing things is both central to poetic practice (for those of us hardy enough to go in for a good simile or metaphor now and then) and critical practice as well. Put simply, comparisons are how a vigorous literary mind works. We are able to make sense of what is new by comparing it to older things. It works if you reverse the equation, too; as T. S. Eliot noted in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," remarkable new works transform and transmute our conceptions of older masterpieces (if we posit that there are, in fact, poems good enough to be considered general masterpieces.) It would seem that, if comparisons are odious, we, as poets and critics, had better get used to the unpleasant smell of ourselves and of others. Or, we could throw the cliché out the window, working under the assumption that throwing clichés out the window is part of our job anyway. That's probably better.

All these issues have been going through my head as I've read, re-read, and re-read Jordan Stempleman's *Facings*, which was put out by Otoliths in 2007. Not only have I been tempted to compare it to things, but there is one specific, generally regarded masterpiece that I've been tempted to compare it to: John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. All the same, I've been wary about this comparison. Those are some mighty big boots to fill, and I do not believe that absolute, unequivocal parity has been established. Nevertheless, all of *Facings* is of a high quality, and a handful of the poems do, in fact, compare (and achieve parity or near-parity) with the poems in Ashbery's book. Thematically, Stempleman and Ashbery cover much of the same ground: alienation, isolation, displacement (sexual, emotional, spiritual, what have you), and the theme that would bind them both to Four Quartets era Eliot (to extend the comparative reach), temporality.

I believe it may be best, when one is being ambitious and daring, to get down to brass tacks as quickly as possibly. Here, quoted in full, is a poem from Stempleman's book, called "The Apartment":

He asked, who lives there,
then brought over his
laundry, covered all the
windows with socks, his old
t-shirts, pillowcases now
separated from their sheets.
The day seemed to go on
forever. The sunlight, and only
the sunlight, almost made its way
through, went on trying to get in
for a very long time.

We see a move here that Ashbery often makes: the placement of a character that remains unnamed, never "takes on flesh," and is surrounded by images of implosion and desolation. An obvious example from *Self-Portrait* would be "A Man of Words," with its memorable opening lines, "His case inspires interest / But little sympathy; it is smaller / Than at first appeared." In the interest of comparison extension, I'd like to opine that the tradition that Ashbery and Stempleman are plugging into here has as much to do with Bertolt Brecht, and his famous alienating techniques, than with any poet in the Modern or Post-Modern

canon (though of course Brecht also wrote poetry.) Brechtian alienation gives us characters that we are not meant to identify with. Given his very catholic taste in art, it is certainly likely that Ashbery would incorporate Brechtian alienation techniques into his poems, and Stempleman has followed suit. It is also worth noting that while sophisticated techniques are employed to create a certain ambience around an amorphous character, we nonetheless have a linear narrative here. Just as “A Man of Words,” despite some opacity, tells a story (literary grandeur gone to seed), so Stempleman’s poem tells a story too. Temporality extended (the day going on “forever,” sunlight trying to get in “for a very long time”) gives a sense of stasis, while the title of the poem tells us that, unlike Eliot’s “Prufrock,” we are looking at a poor man (“old t-shirts” is another clue) wasting away. Rather than Ashbery’s faded grandeur, Stempleman gives us grandeur that never was, is not, and can never be. It would be a bit of a stretch, but you could see in “sunlight” a metaphor for the creative process. Yet this potential saving grace is thwarted, and the ruination that ends Ashbery’s “Man of Words” is also in evidence here.

It would seem that the ability to tell a story, without resorting to epiphanic commonplaces, confessional melodrama, or pseudo-profound mythologizing, is relatively rare in modern poetry. When a middle-of-the-road stalwart like Billy Collins tells a story, we plug up our ears and stick to a party-line that has become rote: give us inquiry, give us exploration, do not give us hokey generalizations and anecdotal pap. What is remarkable about Ashbery, and Stempleman after him, is that a story is half-told, a narrative half-presented, in such a way that we are invited to create a story along with the poet. In this specific case, Stempleman’s language leans towards the homely (in contrast to Ashbery’s more baroque tilt): laundry, socks, and sheets. The combination of quotidian items and an incompletely sketched, though obviously alienated character, who moves through the poem in a kind of ellipse, is novel. To bring biography into the equation, Ashbery is an urban poet; New York and New York life constitutes part of his *métier*. Stempleman is rooted in the Mid-Western (based as he is in Iowa City); homeliness substitutes for urbanity, domestic detail for baroque. Yet the mood, the ambience, is strangely similar.

An even greater quotient of palpability, and affectivity, is visible in “The Retired Couple”:

Stop licking the bread
before calling me into that impossible position again.
The night to remember is impatiently waiting
to be left alone.
It is said there is a greenhouse in this night,
filled with a kind of bamboo
that can tend to itself.
I mean, that’s actually why it’s there.
To live without us, without so much as a visit,
doing whatever it is the unthinkable do.

On the surface level, this poem brings to light another predilection that binds Eliot to Ashbery, and then Ashbery to Stempleman; aphorism. Ashbery’s famous “The night, as usual, knew what it was doing” (not actually from *Self-Portrait*) is echoed here by Stempleman’s “The night to remember is impatiently waiting/ to be left alone.” With Stempleman, as with Eliot and Ashbery, aphorism becomes a way of building what is durable from what is memorable. Like an affecting bit of melody, these lines stick in the reader’s head without effort, rendering the poem a persistent presence, something ineluctable. The substance of this particular phrase is the same kind of desolation visible in “The Apartment,” only this is a two person, rather than a one person scenario. This heightens the emotional tension, ups the ante, as in Ashbery’s “Poem in Three Parts.” It is also worth noting that something is in this poem that is not in Ashbery (or most Eliot); the use of conversational diction we see in “I mean, that’s actually why it’s there.” It is important to remember that Stempleman is, in fact, a younger poet writing in 2008 America. The overt and

excellent classicism of his work would tend to elide this from his profile, but at odd moments such as this, colloquial America jumps into the picture. This is not a fault, and it is to Stempleman's credit that he is able to mix different worlds of language use so effectively.

Ashbery and Stempleman both deal with issues of emotional entanglement. Yet their approach is oblique enough so that, as with storytelling in these poems, we are encouraged to participate. The first two lines of Stempleman's poem are potently ambiguous: "Stop licking the bread / before calling me into that impossible position again." Beyond the brutal sting of a near end-rhyme, what is enunciated here could be a reference to the sexual, the emotional, the spiritual, or any combination or permutation of these. "Impossible position," of course, implies that this retired couple no longer have sex, that physical intimacy has become an impossibility. Yet this is fertile ground for glossing; "licking the bread" could refer to money, or the ravages of age that have forced these two to eat lightly. "Licking the bread" is also repellent, an image of repulsion (leading us back to the Brechtian.) We are not invited to feel along with these two; we may feel like we're looking down the wrong end of a telescope. "Licking" is, or maybe, overtly sexual, so that thematically we have both a kind of avowal and denial in two lines. In short, the way Stempleman opens the poem may give the reader a swift kick in the gut, such as we see when Ashbery writes, in "Farm," "Living with the girl / Got kicked into the sod of things."

I don't have many gripes with *Facings*. I find all of it admirable, some of it stunning. However, I have taken the initiative here and compared it to a masterpiece. If I'm not arguing for parity, it would seem fair that I should lay out some reasons that *Facings* is not a masterpiece on a level with *Self-Portrait*. Very little has been said or written about Ashbery's sensuality. People tend to think of him as an intellectual poet. Yet, *Self-Portrait* is full of sensual details, and it is part of the greatness of the book that it melds the sensual and the intellectual so seamlessly. Stempleman can be a little barren this way, a little short on the sensual details, the "limpid, dense twilight(s)," "smoking dishes," "snake plant(s) and cacti" we see in Ashbery's book. Shortly, what is abstract in Stempleman is more or less equal to what is abstract in Ashbery; what is not in Stempleman is the palpable half of the equation. There is more breath in Ashbery's line, more expansiveness, than is found in Stempleman's rather crimped line; Stempleman, in his lesser poems, tends to rely on the merely clever. Yet, Ashbery did not come to *Self-Portrait* until he was in his late forties; Stempleman released this book at age 30. As an unbiased observer, there would seem to me to be little reason not to believe that, in time, Jordan Stempleman could write a book that would achieve absolute parity with Ashbery, and set the poetry world on its ear all over again.

The Conspiracy Against Poems

(2010)

There is no historical evidence to suggest that during the Romantic era, something called “Poetics” existed. At the time, Wordsworth and Coleridge, both identifiable as “Lake” poets, initiated investigations of a theoretical nature, centered on poetry. These investigations were one of Coleridge’s *métiers*; Wordsworth rarely identified himself as something other than a poet. The controversies that surrounded Wordsworth, from the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* forwards, were centered jointly on his poems and the theories that buttressed them. Why is it that in 2010, a majority of poets, particularly those toiling in experimental milieus, seem both more grounded in and more stimulated by theories than by the poems they bolster? What is this nebulous entity, “poetics,” and how has it sapped the life out of what it is meant to serve? The chief weakness of the pursuit of “poetics,” as I see it, is that it puts premiums on two red herrings—novelties and political correctness. “Poetics,” as practiced by the bolder American universities, wants to investigate the newest of the new, anything (striated, of course, within the taut bounds of political correctness) that has not been done before. But practicing “poetics” creates and perpetuates its own kind of romantic ideology—an unthinking and uncritical belief in one’s self-representations as planted firmly in the new, fresh, and bold. This insidious addiction to novelty cuts off poetics from a serious engagement with poetry’s history. It upholds the post-modern ethos that history is essentially a master narrative created in a homogenous vacuum, and thus worthy to be trashed. Why poetics configures a conspiracy against poems is that it bifurcates poetry, as a realm, into two realms (poetry and theory) and dictates that poems should serve theory and not vice versa.

Poets weaned on poetics never quite reconcile themselves to the reality that poems spun out of flimsy theoretical material cannot have any great or striking impact, either in the long or the short term. All this movement towards theory and concept is mirrored in other art forms; but as the post-modern impulse ages, it may be seen that when taken to an extreme, as it has been in experimental poetry, it creates such an aura of rapid obsolescence around new poetry that one wonders why new poems are being written at all. As the novelty aspect of poetics pushes for newness and gimmick-consonance, the political correctness angle further sharpens things against the emergence of poems. Simply put, poetics is mainly a construct established and put into propulsive motion by white, middle-class academics; and as multiculturalism has emerged as a subsidiary branch of post-modernism, a sense of guilt moves participants not only towards the *outré* but towards anything ethnic or deviant. The problem with poetics generally is that there is little quality control. The conceit of post-modern poetics is that there is no such thing as “quality”; quality is a teetering edifice erected by hegemonic white males to reinforce a master narrative patched up against invasion. Yet the way post-modernists striate things cuts off the levels of nuance within consensus opinions (borne out or subtly shifted over long periods of time) that build canons. Could it be possible that poems sometimes last because they have quality? If quality is not completely subsumed in evanescence, then both novelty and political correctness approaches become quixotic arrows shot at wavering targets. But the point is that in many circles these approaches have become standardized. Generations are now beginning to emerge who have been weaned on these approaches. The upshot is that poets have been formed who respond to theory first, poems second. If poems are a subsidiary branch of theories, then poetry as an endeavor has become so bastardized and decadent that it has ceased to be itself. I want to argue for the permanent preponderance of poems over poetics, and that poems, rather than poetics, need to be starting the fires that add luster to our lives as artists.

There is obviously a neat meta-irony at work here. If this piece starts any fires, it may seem, in the short term, to annihilate itself as poetics qua poetics, willy-nilly. But the larger issues may make the endeavor

worthwhile—that post-modern theory may be killed by artists with art, and if the first baby steps remain theoretical, so be it. What kind of poem, in 2010, could start a fire? Wordsworth's arsonist techniques involved what he deemed a new kind of language. This is what, at the risk of growing tautological, we need now—a new kind of technique. This language, not qua poetics but beyond poetics, would have to eschew certain kinds of novelty and political correctness. It isn't enough to wish for a return to narrative—it needs to be determined what a post-post-modern narrative is (and I freely admit that post-modern is important enough that it needs to be assimilated). The inescapable accusation that follows hard upon these assertions is of regressive conservatism—that moving into a new language world that has consonance with narrative and engages the entire history of poetry is tantamount to going backwards. Yet, it has not yet been widely noted that post-modernism has pushed the art-forms it has infiltrated so far in narrow directions that there is no room for any movement but a backwards one. In an experimental landscape dominated by poems impoverished on both sound and sense levels, to argue for sound and sense becomes a radical move. Thus, sound and sense, the ostensible pillars riveting poems to the ground that they might ascend, become signifiers of detested Romantic impulses, holding out bogus claims of transparency and dangerous delusions of grandeur. In such a landscape, the way forward is the way back, because it must be. For every gimmicky vista that opens up and is instantly thwarted, poets lose more of the capacity to both appreciate and generate the kind of texts that make poetry worthwhile—texts that find inventive ways and shrewd angles with which to create the balance of sound and sense that is the hallmark of durable poetry. Poetry that is truly inventive does not need to entail gimmickry—nor does it need to recreate Romantic sincerity, Victorian sonority, Modernist objectivity or post-modern acerbity. And because invention cannot be anticipated, it would be destructive for me to predict what form it will take or how it will be disseminated.

Poetry is shrewish. For poems to come along and start fires, they would have to burn through enormous resistances. The reason, historically borne out, is that movements become entrenched, and entrenched movements have a tremendous capacity for denial, obliviousness, and discouragement. Because poetry contexts do not entail gross, or even minor, amounts of capital being made or spent, the rewards poets work for are more or less intangible. As such, there is a tremendous delicacy to poets that often congeals into rigidity. That mature poets are often stiffened into rigid postures, and demand degrees of obeisance, necessitates that younger poets receive strong encouragements to conform or be killed. It is also inevitable that each generation will raise only a few poets above the crowd. Nevertheless, to the extent that poets are willing to take up cudgels, a preponderant sense of poems is worth fighting for. Post-modernism has been attenuated into something quite tame; to the extent that the only leaps left to make are, at least in the short term, backwards leaps (into narrative, emotion, sonority) means that the post-modernists expunged too much from what poetry had been before they put up their grayish fortresses. Yet this cannot be a manifesto, because I do not wish to promote any agendas. The essential agenda here is to create, if possible, a context in which poets can decide for themselves the best means of arson, because these grayish fortresses need to be burnt to the ground. It is over the ashes of the moribund that we invent; and if what we invent is poems, and if the poems are built sturdily enough, we do not need to worry that we will appear grayish to whoever succeeds us. That this work needs to be accomplished in different solitudes, rather than in groups, is worth considering; isolation is not merely Romantic, it may be a job requirement. Clannishness and conformity are the major enemies here.

Issues Around Formality

(2019)

Formality in serious art is one of the highest expressions of individuality known to the human race. Why it should be that form and formal rigor were misrepresented in the twentieth century— from the height of individuality into a snobbish, classicist ploy, which represented high art as priggish, "Sunday School"— is because the twentieth century was essentially, to employ America as paradigmatic, a Republican century, in which serious expressions of individuality were frowned upon in high sectors, both in America and in Western Europe. Serious expressions of individuality were largely replaced with empty spectacles, and thus the degeneration of the century into a kind of school of quietude. A Republican century, like the twentieth largely was, regards formality in serious art as one of the gravest threats to the hegemony of homogeneity and non-individuality; and the persecution of serious individuals is de rigueur; what part of me warms to talk about this, is that the Republican twentieth century is now over, Great God Almighty! Now that high ideals around issues of formality in art, and serious artistic individuality, are back in circulation, and the lives of serious artists and those who appreciate serious art need not be macabre (serious art does not have to be humorless, either), we can put our crosses and garlic away and look at the issues around formality which are more intriguing.

Like, for instance, who Mary Harju is— a serious formalist who I tend to think will be underrated over a long period of time, but who will nonetheless fail to drop off into nothingness. Mary is not, to be sure, dazzling the way Abby Heller-Burnham is; and, to shallower aesthetic minds, is easily dismissed as too derivative of Renaissance Humanism to be taken seriously as a major artist. Mary, to me, represents a certain class of artists— formalists— who are solid, and/or workmanlike, without being dazzling, yet whose work tends to endure while a surprising number of dazzling showmen/showgirls disappear. Yet this type of artist, and there are tons of them in different rooms at PMA (Philadelphia Museum of Art) too, have a strange karma— never to appear dazzling, but only solid; and yet to find their work enduring in a solid way, and in such a way to suggest that the expressiveness of mere formality, when executed in a rigorous fashion, is 60/40 correct as the approach to serious art in general. Innovation (maybe, and I am sort of playing Devil's Advocate here) counts 40/60 less than solidity. Republicans and their empty spectacles throw the whole thing into the garbage, as they are taught to do in the school of quietude; but in a more liberated century, artists will have to decide for themselves what mere formality and formal rigor count for, even as I have a suspicion that Mary's paintings may sneak up on some in an uncomfortable fashion over a long period of time.

My own approach to formality in poetry is a complex one. As of one hundred years ago, rhyme and rhyming poetry still dominated most poetry economies, both in the United States and Europe. That poetry should involve heightened language, what is commonly referred to as poetic diction, was not then in question. Century XX stripped things back so that by the turn of the century into the twenty-first, when I began to seriously publish, rhyme and rhyming poetry, and poetic diction with it, had been replaced by a hodge-podge of free verse or blank verse approaches (blank verse being unrhymed iambic pentameter, like *Paradise Lost* or *Hyperion*), and an ambitious poet was forced to make a kind, manner or form of music that would have been considered stunted from the 1920s and back. Being a student of the Romantics and Milton, I chose to address this difficulty, which takes formality in poetry and cheese-grates it, by using a technique I call "clustering"; building musical effects into poems without being obsequious to the convention of end-rhymes. On the other hand, when by 2018 I found myself publishing The Ballad of Robert Johnson, I felt that the time had arrived when hand-over-fist formality could again be accepted into English-language poetry, as both an expression of individuality and a rejection of what were still standardized poetry operations.

Twentieth-century avant-gardism (and I do consider Robert Johnson an adjunct to post-avant or the avant-garde) was short on discussions of formal beauty in high art. "Beauty" itself, as a manifest aim in art, was mistrusted, and gamed against heavily. In a way and on a very salient level, this travesties the entire endeavor of major high art consonance, which must include, as a component aspect, the idea

that formal beauty ranks high on imperative spreadsheets, no matter what other avant-garde imperatives may ride alongside it. This game against formal beauty guaranteed that, in the twentieth century, the likes of William Blake- a comparative novice/amateur, whose worth as a higher artist is contained in a philosophical imperative and visionary stance puerile next to Keats' Odal vision- could be given a higher ranking than Keats, who supersedes Blake at every point, both as formalist and philosophe.

Keats' prosody, his metrics, the formal beauty of his best poetry, is a political statement in and of itself, against society which would impinge on the individual, against individual-slandering authority as well. In a certain way and on a certain level, formal beauty in high art is the ultimate cultural statement of individuality and innovative power against authority, and an ultimate statement (also) of rebellion. By granting extreme non-homogeneity to the work, which inheres not just superficially but profoundly within the works' confines, and raises the work to a level at which history must be brought into focus by the works' grandiosity (and I do mean grandiosity against mere novelty, as mere novelty is one quagmire built into century XX avant-gardism), the work situates itself within its own transcendent mode of visualization/realization, and authority instantly cringes at having its vestments and privileges stripped from it. Century XX avant-gardism was very secretly invested in different forms of homogenization, up to and including complicity with authoritarian governments- thus, its tendencies to de-emphasize, demean, and degrade formality and/or formal beauty.

This sense- that twentieth century avant-gardism was secretly a game against formality, and/or formal beauty, and thus posited against an important component element of major high art consonance- is what makes it so easy to dispense with. By emptying art of anything artistic, both avant-gardists and centrists proved themselves to be non-artists. They, thus, might as well have been government clerics or bureaucratic scribes- they were there, in high art spaces, for the wrong reasons. This century, a gauntlet has already been laid down against these middling-at-best structures, welcoming formality and/or formal beauty in high art back into the fold, understanding what put amateurism in place of giftedness and inverting things back to where they belong, which is (to be frank, and perhaps overly general) the nineteenth century and back. Rebellion in century XX avant-gardism was faux-rebellion- more in cahoots with authoritarian impulses and destructive games than not- now, we stand ready to let our own version of prosody, its masterful manifestation and enactment, to dictate terms to us about how we may cultivate any extreme form/manner of artistic individuality against the rest of the world (art-world or otherwise) which is not us, and thus make a potent political statement that there is room, in American society, for individuals to stand against the masses, and for the realization of beauty, from individuals on out, to become an event of some consequence for the whole of society at large.

Post-Avant: A Meta-Narrative

(2010)

Some time during the summer of 2009, I initiated a discourse on my blog, *Stoning the Devil*. The object of this discourse was to give the term “post-avant” concrete significations. “Post-avant” is a term with a mysterious history and an unknown etymology. Up until the discourse, no one had demonstrated the initiative to fix the term in place. That it signified, in some sense, contemporary experimental poetry, was well known; what, specifically, made post-avant poetry post-avant (rather than, say, Language poetry or Flarf) was not known. Prior to the composition of this discourse (which was very much interactive, in a “blog,” virtual context) I had devised a definition of post-avant; I called it “the diasporic movement of Language poetry towards a new synthesis with narrative and erotic elements.” I still find this to be, on some levels, a viable definition, but a little top-heavy and academic to use in a blog context (where the patience of deliberate reading habits is only slowly becoming common, both for readers and writers.) The wedge I used into this discourse was something more like a sound-bite in the American press; I defined post-avant as “anything with an edge.” I feel ambivalent about this move now— if “diasporic movement” was top-heavy and academic, “edge” was vague and too catch-all. But I forged ahead with “edge,” and the discourse took off. Largely through links placed on a number of blogs, the discourse gained hundreds of readers, but generated mostly critical comments. What I would like to do in this essay is explore some pieces of the discourse that still seem interesting, in a context (print anthology) that encourages patient reading and serious, formalized commentary. In the end, I believe that the post-avant discourse is more intriguing for bits and pieces it generated than for what it told its audience about this amorphous entity, “post-avant,” which has still yet to generate currency or a strong foot-hold among a wide number of poets.

One primary issue that got addressed in passing, and that I find interesting, is the issue of movement-titles: specifically, whether they are ciphers or not. Here is how I chose to address the issue in the blog discourse:

Many people continue to complain that “post-avant,” as a phrase, is meaningless, a cipher. I would not necessarily disagree that “post-avant,” in and of itself, is a cipher, but I do not find this to be a problem...what does “post-modern,” in and of itself, mean? Whatever comes after Modernism, whatever that happens to be? What about “Romanticism” or “Symbolism”?

In the heat of the moment, I neglected to mention poetry movements to which relevant appellations have been affixed, like Objectivism and Surrealism. Many people who commented had specific complaints about the term “post-avant”; that it is logically absurd, because it is impossible to be “post” whatever “avant” is. A more thoughtful take than the one I presented on my blog (or the responses my detractors offered) might walk a middle ground between these two responses; that literary appellations used to designate movements have a so-so success ratio, when measured in terms of their resonant power. It would be nice if self-conscious literary creators could aim for the upwards target, name their movements with a certain amount of caution and deliberation; but the lesson here may be that naming movements is generally a haphazard venture. Not everything that sticks, name-wise, sticks for a reason; the arbitrary nature of the signifier is applicant even in situations when (poets think) it should not be. Other issues that came up in the context of the discourse have even more rich complications, which will move us farther from post-avant and closer, I hope, to issues with more permanent relevance.

Here is a basic issue that came up repeatedly: to be an artist (rather than merely a poet) using poetry as a means of expression, how wide does one’s frame of reference need to be; to put it in another (perhaps more positive) light, what is the maximum range potential for poets (by range, I mean diversified knowledge of the arts, as arts)? I brought this up online, and I bring it up again here, because I believe that poets over the last forty years have lost something. I specifically designate fifty years because fifty years roughly corresponds to the advent of post-modernism which, despite the cipher status of its common name, has revolutionized the world of the visual arts (including film) while poetry has (arguably, at least in its mainstream manifestations) remained virtually untouched. What have been

the manifestations of post-modernism in the visual arts? In large measure, straightforward painting has been marginalized, in favor of videos, installations, and conceptual pieces. In this case, it is not so much the forms but the import of the forms that matters—in these works, visual artists have made strides towards new definitions of space, bodies, sexuality, language, history, and the contentious relationship of art and politics. The only major poetry movement of the past fifty years that can make similar claims is Language poetry—however, I have seen little acknowledgement among Language poets of what these visual artists have achieved. This is important because the visual artists (from Warhol to Nauman) were mining this terrain for 15-20 years before the Language poets emerged in cohesive form in the 1980s. Moreover, visual artists like Warhol, Nauman, and more contemporary artists like Mike Kelley, Jeff Koons, and Paul McCarthy have conquered the museums, galleries, and art-markets, while Language poetry remains barely acknowledged by mainstream poetry publishers, journals, and academies. In other words, the Language poets have been considerably less successful than the visual artists in disseminating their version of post-modernism, and were beat to the punch into the bargain. All this combines to give experimental poetry the look of a lag-behind. There are good reasons to support the notion that art-forms should not compete with each other. Nevertheless, the demarcations have become so pronounced that visual artists rarely even mention contemporary poetry. I (unabashedly) believe that this is a problem. It certainly cannot be rectified by one article, but it is an issue that deserves as much attention as any nascent poetry movement.

I am proud that the discourse touched on levels more fundamental than “frames of reference” and “maximum range potentials.” I made the argument that two essential constituent elements of artistic process have a preponderant quality, which much experimental poetry has denied them: subjectivity and representation. Often, an emphasis has been placed on non-representational poetry, and the stance that manifestly subjective poetry imposes a kind of closure on poems-as-constructs. There is undoubtedly some truth to these positions, especially as regards mainstream verse, which tends to lean heavily on the subjectivity of poets as a perceived wellspring of universal wisdom. Representation becomes the tool by which this wisdom is revealed to the world. Dealing with poems that I called “post-avant” or “edgy” allowed me to open up the possibility that perhaps experimental poets have thrown out too much. Poets in this milieu tend to defend their aesthetic decisions by falling back on the tenets of Deconstructionism—that words, though arbitrary, are tactile and sensuous, capable of carrying the weight of poems, series of poems, and books, in and of themselves. I find this problematic, on several levels—firstly, because I do not enjoy engaging texts that preserve what I perceive to be myths about language (that the tactility of words is sufficient to justify a thematically, narratively, and affectively impoverished text); secondly, because contemporary experimental poets have failed to win a significant number of converts, either among the general public or among wide numbers of poets; thirdly, because new generations are rising up, that are looking for fresh perspectives and novel directions; as such, I would hope that rehashing the textual ethos of an earlier movement would not seem particularly interesting. Roland Barthes discusses the necessity of *bits* of narrative, *bits* of representation; as he says, “the text needs its shadow” (32)—the novels of Robbe-Grillet demonstrate how this can be done. There are few post-modern poetry texts that raise possibilities of intermittent subjectivity and representation to the apotheosis that a text like *Jealousy* does, and all too often these texts are simply evacuated of any traces of humanity. They tend to be hermetic, and exceedingly prudish. There is a definite perversity to denying the preponderance of subjectivity and representation, and not necessarily an endearing perversity. The truth is straightforward: words not charged with at least traces of subjectivity and representational import, words which are *merely* tactile, generally hold little pleasure for most audiences.

Once it is acknowledged that subjectivity and representation are, in some senses, preponderant, questions arise as to *what* should be represented and *who* should be representing it. Much of the poetry I was writing about is both overtly narrative and explicitly sexual—thus, I argued for post-avant as a movement with “sex at the center.” Central inclusion of sexuality in an art-movement seems so obvious in so many ways (sex having been at the center of most art-forms for the length of recorded history) that it may seem strange that I felt the need to argue for sex’s centrality. However, I feel that the new generation of experimental poets has been, in many senses, sanitized into frigidity by their teachers. So, like arguing that blinks should follow a poke in the eye, I argued for sex at the center of post-avant. The texts I used to posit this argument were ones like Brooklyn Copeland’s chapbook *Borrowed House*, which uses sex as one component part of a mosaic woven of desire, dark imagery, need for intimacy and impulses to confess (which never quite shade into the melodramatic bathos of Confessionalism.) The rag and bone shop of the heart that Yeats wrote of has all the durability and

permanence (not to mention facility) of words, with the added bonus that affect, sexuality, and their representations are *not* arbitrary. They are born out of lived experience, which is (willy-nilly) as preponderant as subjectivity and representation. “Write what you know” is a pretty hoary cliché—nevertheless, like most clichés, there is a grain of truth to it. Writing what you know does not necessitate the impartation of universal wisdom, or even an attempt to do so— we can know disjuncture, ellipse, torqued forms of narrativity— but it does presuppose the preponderance of subjectivity, that I continue to argue for. Hard as it is to believe, all these home-truths (some of which border, admittedly, on platitudes) have not been spoken in an experimental poetry context in decades. In earlier contexts, they would have all the surprise of a tautology or axiom; in 2010, I hope they may be relevant, even revelatory. All these are the *what*; as to the *who*, it is my conviction that any poet (male or female) should be able to write as much about sex as they wish. The only ideology that is useful for an artist is one of complete freedom. Special interest groups want political correctness; artists (and I do not mean to romanticize the status of artists) know that there is no “correctness” in politics or anywhere else. Correctness is relative, and “correct” for an artist is whatever forms conform to the myriad shapes of subjectivities that can be manifested in text.

The problem, as I see it, is that most poets currently writing in the English language approach poetry in a way consonant with what I call minor artist strategies. They let their texts be dictated by little rule books and primers they carry around; everything must be defined, everything must be spelled out. Approaches to representation and its sword-carrier, narrative, are decided beforehand; and those that do away with narrative do away with thematics into the bargain. Who wants to read poetry with no themes? Those who willfully obfuscate away from narrative build little but obsolescence into their poems. Likewise, those who take a hackneyed approach to narrative guarantee that their poems can be of no continuing interest, as invention is effaced from their discipline. That rare middle ground, where narrative approaches are concerned, in which invention is met by discipline, and old themes are endlessly refreshed, is only accessible to those who approach poetry like the major high art form it is. “Post-avant,” as I have defined it, is an ideal; it occupies the space wherein that rare middle ground approach to representation can be occupied and reoccupied. These issues may be pertinent to anyone who feels that the second half of century XX saw too much taken away too fast from English language poetry; and who want to see vistas open up that can lead our poetry back to the safety of danger, the middle ground of extremes, and the timeliness of permanence.

Sex and Shadows

(2009-2021)

The poems I would like to explore today belong to Boston's Mary Walker Graham. Many of Graham's poems adopt the stance that the protagonist seems either to be a sort of victim, or caught in the throes of self-castigation; veer towards the straight Confessional, but always with an added dimension and depth (imaginative capacity) which places her (to my eyes) squarely within the confines of post-avant. The following is a prose poem, entitled *A Pit, A Broken Jaw, A Fever*:

When I say pit, I'm thinking of a peach's. As in James and the Giant, as in: the night has many things for a girl to imagine. The way the flesh of the peach can never be extricated, but clings— the fingers follow the juice. The tongue proceeds along the groove. Dark peach: become a night cavern— an ocean's inside us— a balloon for traveling over. When I said galleons of strong arms without heads, I meant natives, ancient. I meant it takes me a long time to get past the hands of men; I can barely get to their elbows. How a twin bed can become an anchor. How a balloon floating up the stairwell can become a person. Across the sea of the hallway then, I floated. I hung to the fluorescent fixtures in the bathroom, I saw a decapitated head on the toilet. I'll do anything to keep from going in there. I only find the magazines under the mattress, the Vaseline in the headboard cabinet. A thought so hot you can't touch it. A pit. A broken jaw. A fever.

This poem oozes creepiness. Among the aspects I find most notable: the way that Graham's protagonist self-infantilizes (regarding herself not as a woman but as a "girl"), the imagery that conflates the sexual with the horrific (Vaseline butting against a decapitated head, broken jaws, fevers), and the intimation that what is at the heart of this confrontation is some sort of compulsive relationship. Yet the poem is intriguing because, despite its intimations, it never abandons the first person singular. Whomever the "you" happens to be, we never see them, they are never addressed, and the poem posits no "Other." There is solipsism at work, which cuts the implied "you" down to size; the narrator may be involved in an unhealthy relationship, but the primary feeling we get is one of self-loathing and self-disgust, expressed with compelling (and disturbing) intensity. The generalized phrases, addressed to men, serve to illustrate, as is Graham's wont, the narrator's alienation from whatever specific man is sewn into the situation, interior and exterior.

There is also an unlikely quality to Graham's metaphors: what exactly could "balloon" imply, in this context? How can it be connected to the "peach" that Graham puts it up against? At one point, Graham creates a metaphoric chain, all meant to represent the same thing: *dark peach, night cavern, ocean, balloon*. The most obvious interpretation is that the metaphor is meant to signify the female sexual organ. However, the metaphoric chain is distorted, phantasmagoric, and macabre. A stretch is required to allow the metaphoric chain to work, just as Graham stretches to convey what she wants to convey, which is equally brutal and surreal, and supports a consistent persona. The following poem, *Double*, works an analogous angle:

*Here is a box of fish marked tragedy.
Is it different from the dream*

*in which your alter ego kills the girl?
You are the same, and everyone knows it,*

*whether tracing the delicate lip of the oyster shell,
or sharpening your blade in the train car.*

*The marvelous glint is the same.
Though you think you sleep, you wake*

*and walk into the hospital, fingering
each instrument, opening each case with care.*

*The scales fall away with a scraping motion.
You are the surgeon and you are the girl.*

*Whether you lie like feathers on the pavement,
or coolly pocket your equipment, and walk away...*

*You are the same; and you are the same.
You only sleep to enter the luminous cave.*

I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that this poem places itself in an introspective realm of infantile sexuality. Yet that it is written from an adult perspective gives it a kind of double edge. If there is terror here, it is terror of the protagonist's own sexual power. The interest and pleasure for the reader is in trying to understand the different levels of self-evaluation that are going on, and how they affix to the narrator's sense of herself— how her persona is constructed. As in *A Pit*, there is a level of sexual solipsism inhering in the protagonist which becomes a maze, in and of itself. There is also a level on which the poem exteriorizes its own discomfort through the use of "gross" imagery: box(es) of fish, blades, surgeons. What is the nature of the operation? What necessitates it?

Reversing *A Pit*, the poem is given added depth because it is presented in the second person: not "I" but "you." It takes on the quality of a narrator talking to herself about herself, and makes the poem an exercise in imaginative self-consciousness, more so than *A Pit*. I find this admirable because it recuperates the tone of Confessional poetry, but puts it through a new kind of synesthetic light filter. What Graham sees as "Double" could be a split between her body and her mind, or between her sexuality and her intellect, or even between herself and another. Whatever it is, it has left her in pieces, and the poem seems to be an attempt to reassemble herself. Both of these poems, like other Graham work, present a consistent persona, a tangent to Stacy Blair's: a polymorphously perverse girl-woman lost in the never-land of her own body (and polymorphously perverse can imply a body of thoughts and ideas in addition to the mere physical mechanism.) Though possibly mainstream-consonant, as has been duly noted, through usage of conventional narrative techniques, and exploration of familiar emotions, it would be difficult to get more edgy, in the parlance of this discourse around post-avant, than that.

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The second portion of the Sex and Terror post is being scribed at a later date: January 2017. With the addition of new material to P.F.S. Post from Stacy Blair, a Midwestern poetess, there is more to see and say about the pertinent issues hewn into these texts— the creation of a new kind of female persona in American poetry; a new approach to female sexuality and the female body; and a continuing, obsessive interest in the dark or shaded portion of both sexual and human reality. As of January 21, the poem by Stacy Blair which crowns PFS Post is called *Photo Experiments*:

*Blonde locks jut out over the tops of pigtails,
bleached beach/sand-color by the sun.
Time's short between this photograph and my regard.
Picture: no flower lays or shoes, just
young grass hips. She is, I am, we were,
very young. The entire page of this album
flanks history; under my mind, another
helpless time explosion. I was, we were, are,
naked newborn, as our little limbs on film.*

What might strike the reader as most urgent thematically— the artful insinuation of pregnancy— is buttressed by the same strain of self-castigation, self-reproach, and self-mistrust we find in Graham. Like Graham, "young grass hips," "flanks," and "flower lays" are all heavy innuendo about carnality. What makes the poem so fascinating are the divisions and precisions Blair incises into her perceptions of identity— who she was, who she is now as two distinct selves; who she is and who her assumed lover is, also as two distinct selves; and the third entity they create together (possibly the unborn child) being distinct from them as another gestalt entity. It is difficult not to read "helpless time explosion" specifically as a reference to pregnancy— and equally gripping, because addressed, text-wise, with taut, terse authority. Caesuras here create a sense of hypnosis for the reader, brief incantation. The poem ends in irresolution, purposefully— and the chiaroscuro edge (or edges) of what I called post-avant many years ago is very

much in effect, on display. Why the Aughts created this sense of dread, of foreboding, along with the shadowy seductiveness of stark eroticism, is anyone's guess; a reaction, perhaps, to the stunted quality of the female body (and the female brain in response) in century XX art?

Acknowledgements

The Argotist:

Century XX after Four Quartets
Entitlements: Post-Modernism, Capitalism, and the Threat to Poetry's History
On the Necessity of Bad Reviews
The Conspiracy Against Poems

Jacket:

Wordsworth @ McDonald's
On Jordan Stempleman's Facings

Word for Word:

The Decay of Spirituality in Poetry
Loving the Alien

Stoning the Devil:

Anything with an Edge: Rethinking Post-Avant
Sex and Shadows

Stress Fractures (anthology):

Post-Avant: A Meta-Narrative

As/Is group poetry blog:

Issues Around Formality

Adam Fieled & Steve Halle

**Waxing Hot Poetics
Dialogue 2006**



SH: Useful concepts. I want to respond on Keats' "Negative Capability," which I think introduced several useful concepts into modern poetics, and also served as a birthplace for the non-lyric/non-Romantic (I guess what you'd call "post-avant") lineage alive in contemporary poetics.

First, I view Keats as the odd Romantic, along with Shelley. Whereas Shelley validated the entry of politics into poetry, Keats rebelled against the first wave of Romantics by heightening the power of the imagination and downplaying Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime."

The imaginative poetry Keats penned allowed for oddly juxtaposed words; in his Odes, "Nightingale" & "Grecian Urn", for example; in order to create a reflection of his state of mind. Even though these two poems work in a highly stylized and rhetorical way, they reflect on Keats' consciousness-- the power of imagination and the untranslatable power of the mind to hold disparate concepts without struggle. The idea of negative capability is also (ironically) an example of negative capability because neither Keats, nor anyone since, has presented, as far as I know, a good reason why some people embrace mystery and some people need closure.

"Indeterminacy" in poetry, it seems to me, is another big point of contention among experimentalists today, and I would assert that Keats' negative capability is the concept which paved the way for indeterminate poetics. I believe a relationship exists between the misinterpretation of "first thought, best thought" and the misuse of negative capability. People like to assume that Ginsberg, Kerouac and the Beats meant "first word, best word" or "first draft, best draft" and use their teachings, which are highly formulated methods for improvisational poetry, to justify writing whatever comes to mind. As we see with Bukowski, a poet who edited little (if at all), this work sometimes succeeds, often falls flat. The same is true for indeterminate poets whose work lacks closure. I think some poets misuse negative capability or "rejection of closure" as a means to avoid striving or thinking about their work. Poets who misuse negative capability think they can avoid essence, substance and arrival, but I think this is a big mistake because it fools poets into thinking they don't need intention or investigation and can operate solely on intuition.

Keats is also perhaps the first poet to address the idea that language is unsatisfactory for expressing ideas completely (though Shelley suggested this too). As skilled as any poet may be as “word-smith”, the poem will still be lacking to the thing-in-itself: be it the real triggering element of the poem or some abstract or intense thought or sensation the poet tries to grasp. Through negative capability and his understanding of the powers of and limitations of art, Keats may have been the earliest antecedent to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets of this century. Language poets, of course, understood the fallibility of linguistic expression, so they began to work with language the way a painter might work with paints, allowing for pure linguistic abstraction and/or frustration, depending on whose side you're on. Critics sometimes call Keats a "mood" poet, meaning that every single word did not have to make total logical sense in the poem. Instead, Keats' linguistic consistency depended upon creating the desired mood, a different way of hitting "the just note": *le mot juste*.

Previous to lang-po, I look at Keats as having laid the groundwork for the High Modernists, especially Wallace Stevens, who tried and perhaps failed as much as Keats did to create “poetry of imagination” or “supreme fiction”. Like Keats, Stevens valued the imagination of the maker over the rational mind, even though I feel that Stevens, again like Keats, often wrote rational and calculated poems. Keats' influence and the influence of negative capability cannot be overstated in an existence wherein making rational sense of everyday life, let alone the “big questions”, is nearly impossible.

AF: I take most of your points. The one problem I have with the schema that would put Keats behind lang-po & post-avant is that one could make a valid argument that Keats, bent as he was on Romantic (maybe post-Romantic) ideas of personal feeling & personal expression, pursued aims antithetical to these movements. It helps to remember that Keats mentioned “Negative Capability” in a letter, & he was referring to Shakespeare & Shakespeare’s dramatic technique, rather than his own poetry, which is rooted very much in Romantic explorations of self & self-hood (whether this is done obliquely, as in “Grecian Urn”, or directly, as in “Nightingale” & his great sonnets). In theory, Negative Capability (& its implicit ancillary devices, non-linearity, allusiveness, abstruse tangent writing, deferral of personal expression, etc.) fits in snugly to the po-mo ethos that dictates what many of us do.

But Negative Capability doesn't factor as much into Keats' own poetry as most people tend to assume. Even when he steps beyond the personal, it's often to challenge a historical figure-- "Hyperion" is a direct response to Milton—or to tell a richly detailed but essentially linear story, as in "Isabella" & "The Eve of St. Agnes". So, I like the connection of Keats to Stevens & post-avant, & I'm willing to give it some cred, but for me, Lord Byron takes the "proto-po-mo" cake. Remember that extreme self-obsession (like extreme impersonality, or anything extreme, in fact) is also a common "po-mo" trope—think of the self-mythologizing of Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Tracy Emin, Robert Mapplethorpe, not to mention poets like Bukowski & Ginsberg & before them Williams & Pound. Byron's complete & often facetious self-absorption (pushed knowingly to the point of self-parody) paved the way for the "art of celebrity culture" or "art-in-kitsch" that dictates so much of what we've seen in the past fifty years (in the multi-media continuum of the "aesthetic").

SH: About the Net: the pros of the Internet poetry boom far outweigh the cons, i.m.h.o. It suits modern (United States) societal impulses to be able to get what you want, when you want it. In your case and mine, we publish virtually what we want, when we want to. In that sense, it's gratifying. We don't have to sift through mountainous submissions piles. As far as publishing our own work, 'zines and blogs can offer instant gratification to us like no print outlet can.

The "con" of instant gratification would seem to be instant disposability. A plethora of information means we face a choosier readership. When you purchase a print journal or collection, the tendency is to read it: it was a "monied" choice. As for my blog, people have to want to read what's there. If they aren't interested, they're a mouse click away from something different. You and I have both discussed new poetry and the prospect of the old theme of immortality through verse. I think it's pointless to think about, because we can easily lose focus on what's important: the real work we do. The value of the lifestyle we lead (internet or not) is in doing the work, the process. I think your outlook on this might differ from mine, but I respect even the untrained poet because, essentially, he/she is getting the same benefits from doing the work as I am, regardless of poetic knowledge, lineage, theory or literary history. That's not to say I find untrained poets' work interesting. More than likely, the opposite is true, but I think I can quickly discern whether or not anyone will challenge my intellect, which is a big draw for me.

In addition to the instant gratification/instant disposability dichotomy the Internet establishes, the possibility of e-books excites me. I like materials and mobility. The combination of those two things is exciting. For the poems I write now, especially “investigative” poems, I like to have synthetic linguistic fragments or ideas handy. The Internet, and its ever-growing portability, enhances these desires for me. It's the old “writerly” advice I've heard from a number of sources: always have a book, a pen and paper on hand. With notebook computers and wi-fi technology, I can have all three in one. And given the trend of technology to shrink, portability will only increase. Bill Allegrezza's “moria” e-books are quite exciting because I can access them from virtually anywhere. The authors he publishes sacrifice money for hit counts. I think I'm resigned to the idea I'll never get rich off the “po-biz” game, so I'd rather publish an e-book that gets 3000 hits a month than make \$3000 from a print book no one reads. The attention span and eye-training it takes to read an e-book will develop, as well.

The fact of the matter is, the Internet is the hub of the counterculture. This is where you MUST be if you write differently, think differently or live differently; our circle of “avant-minded” poets populates the Internet. The only way around its importance is with “eminence”, which few younger poets can claim. The Internet is the only way around the taste-making large-scale corporations like Borders and Barnes and Noble. They don't carry counterculture material per se; they carry what sells because it's the essence of capitalism to do so.

AF: All good points & taken. One thing I would add about the Net is its international aspect. How else could we be in daily contact with poets in Mexico, Canada, England & Australia? This, I think, is the key to the success of JACKET. All artists have a need for commonality, to be part of a community larger than the small milieus that they generally, inevitably inhabit. JACKET has been instrumental in turning post-avant from a plethora of small, insular groups into a unified, international whole. So, we have a publication that everyone, or almost everyone, in the post-avant community reads. The consolidation & unification of post-avant is almost entirely due to the influence of the Net. Centrist poetry can lay claim to no such unity. Do English & Australian & Canadian Centrist poets read American Centrist journals, & vice versa? I would wager that they don't. What I think post-

avant really needs is a print equivalent of JACKET. If we could get in print what's already in motion on the Web, we'd really be poised for world domination.

SH: Where does post-avant poetry need to go and why does it need to go there?

This is a difficult question. I'm going to approach it from two angles, and then go on my own tangent. First, Ray Bianchi has said in conversation that post-avant poetry (I think he called it "experimental") needs an audience aside from poets. He compared post-avant poetics to contemporary visual art and avant-garde jazz, both of which he feels have an audience, albeit small ones, outside of the artists themselves. Regarding avant-garde jazz or improvised music or whatever they're calling it right now, I agree with Ray. Many of the local improvised music concert series in Chicago draw good-sized crowds. Sure, many of the non-musicians who go to these shows are artists, and experimental artists, in other fields, but it is an audience separate from the makers themselves; this is of utmost importance. People often compare modern poetics to a self-perpetuating system or "closed circle". Post-avant seems to be a scaled down version of that, based on its "marginalized" status. Even though mainstream poetry is not widely read, I believe occasional readers of poetry tend to buy what Barnes & Noble carries on its brick and mortar store shelves. It's a scary thought if you're an experimental or "post-avant" writer. B&N tends to carry only the APR/Poetry crowd and their predecessors.

Additionally, Ted Kooser's big push as poet laureate has been to encourage poets to make "more accessible poems." You and I have talked about creating a middle path between extremely experimental and Centrist work, but I'm not sure we've settled on an answer. Poetry, in its loftiest manifestations, must work to move human linguistic and artistic expression forward. Kooser seems almost to suggest reversion to more basic creations, to expand the public's interest in verse culture. I think it's a dangerous idea. We first must answer this question: what do we (as poets) and everyone else (potential readers) want from poetry? I myself want poetry to live up to other art forms. What I mean is, poetry seems to be years behind other art modes (visual art, avant jazz specifically), with notable forward-thinking exceptions like Gertrude Stein and her aesthetic progeny. "New Thing" jazz started happening in the mid 1960s; Abstract Expressionism in art in the 1950s. What is the poetic equivalent of these, and when did it come into fashion?

Post-avant poetry might be the answer to that question in a general way (or at least some of its subsections). I don't feel that post-avant needs to reach toward the mainstream. Eventually the mainstream and post-avant or experimental poetics will merge--that seems to be the trend. When will this happen? Not for a while. I've generally heard it said that any move to anthologize poets is way behind the current trends in poetics, sometimes 50 years behind. Pierre Joris' and Jerome Rothenberg's *Poems for the Millennium* is perhaps the closest thing to an "anthology of the now" we have in poetry, and I don't think it's up-to-the-minute. Anthologies bring experimental verse to the classroom and seal its canonization. That's the path to "mainstream" readership and exposure to non-poet readers. Perhaps moves toward online anthologizing and the instantaneous possibility of the Internet will help post-avant poetry.

Speculation aside, I don't know if I'm as distressed about post-avant's lack of non-poet readership. I see a great amount of high-quality work emerging from the post-avant community, especially through editing *Seven Corners*. I like the directions post-avant is headed in: investigative poetics, destabilization of the egotistical sublime, improvisational poetics, contingent poetics, synthetic language, multilingual poetry, expanded translation, re-co-opting language through political-poetic experimentation, etc.--important and interesting stuff, for my money. I'm sure you notice the same thing in *PFS Post*--the poets are there, the work is good, what else can we ask for? The commitment should always be to doing the work, the "real work" as Gary Snyder would say. If the work is good, the readership will follow. For me, being a poet, post-avant or otherwise, is about the "process" of it all, the practice, the involvement with the art and the critical discussion that it creates.

AF: I think "process orientation" is indeed important, much more than the petty rat-race that poets (myself included) often get sucked into. My own particular preference would be towards a new kind of Formalism. When you say Formalism, people think you mean rhyming poems, odes & Shakespearean sonnets. I don't mean that at all. For me, Formalism means, quite simply, the willingness & devoted impetus to create new forms. For me, Picasso was the ultimate Formalist, though he's been tagged "Cubist" & lots of other things. Formalism ties in to "seriality", working in series; you create a new form, then bend it & twist it every which way; exploring, seeing what works, "milking" it. Picasso spent decades proceeding in this fashion; as did Matisse, Monet, Braque, lots of the best visual artists. I

suppose you could call Robert Creeley a serial poet—he came up with a signature style, & then most of his poems became (for the most part) variations on a theme. O’Hara’s “Lunch Poems” are another good example of serial poetry composition. Yet, no one talks about Creeley or O’Hara as Formalists, because, again, Formalism is associated with archaisms, tepid retreads of old forms. Maybe Neo-Formalism would be the movement I’d most like to create, if I should have the good fortune!

Steve Halle & Adam Fielded 2006

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EXILE AND EXEGESIS

261 and Nightingale

I am continuing develop connective tissue, in a critical context/framework, between Keats' Odes and the Cheltenham Elegies. Taking "Nightingale" and 261 ("Never one to cut corners..."), and a shared visionary sequence between the two poems— Keats in his poem, through the process of composition (Poesy, and its "viewless" wings), is able to extend the reach of his vision into the dark woods to co-mingle/commiserate with his synecdoche; just as the protagonist of 261, on the viewless wings of Poesy again, is able to "pull a rough U-turn" ("Here's where the fun starts...") on Old York Road at midnight, and thus join the ambiguous hero/anti-hero of the poem. This, doubled between the two poems, enacts a transmigration process which is an outlet and a subtext of the visionary, and temporally freezes the sense that what the nightingale/ "rogue driver" of 261 signify— night, death, physical mortality, but also an inverse (perverse) owning of dark freedom and power— is matched by a negatively capable textual engagement.

Never one to cut corners about cutting
corners, you spun the Subaru into a rough
U-turn right in the middle of Old York Road
at midnight, scaring the shit out of this self-
declared "artist." The issue, as ever, was
nothing particular to celebrate. We could
only connect nothing with nothing in our
private suburban waste land. Here's where
the fun starts— I got out, motherfucker.
I made it. I say "I," and it works. But Old
York Road at midnight is still what it is.
I still have to live there the same way you do.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Here is an interesting discrepancy: the “I” in 261 (important, also, to note that the rogue driver’s U-turn being made in the poem may be turning back to Cheltenham) manages to turn the proverbial tables on his companion (rhetorically/textually) twice (“But Old York Road at midnight...”), thus re-living the U-turn twice, rather than Keats’ singular journey into the dark woods. Keats does not begin to develop any kind of bravado against his Muse; conversely, the two textual U-turns in 261 demonstrate first, an ostensible escape from Cheltenham (which amounts to an assertion of personal or individual, artistic success), and then a renascence to a position that what Cheltenham and Old York Road signify are omnipresent in the human continuum; and both express bravado in both individualism and intellectual mastery. So does Keats enter the sensuous, shadowy paradise of the woods and then sink downwards, first into being grounded, then (as an extension) into Lethe-consonant (forgetful) despondency; and these are two textual journeys of visionary identification and self-transcendence. The possible inversion, in which Keats’ Ode, through its ultimate sense of lost, demeaned, defeated yet sensually self-aware consciousness, against textual flights or “Fancies,” constitutes a kind of elegy, while the Cheltenham Elegy, through its ultimate air of sangfroid and mastery (empowerment over harsh circumstances) demonstrates, if not exactly *odal joy*, certainly a sense of a kind of textual *tour de force* being enacted in a compressed space, an ambiance of the explosive, which is not in Keats. The nightingale and 261’s rogue driver (Chris) are both phantoms, essentially: rhetorically addressed, evanescent. The negatively capable identification process occurs once in the present (Keats, appropriate for an ode) and once in a visioned/visionary past (261, appropriate for an elegy)— and it is merely textual, unperceived, unappreciated by one inhuman Other (the nightingale) and one human Other (Chris). The ultimate destination, why the identification process is enacted, is for the imagined, individual reader-as-third party.

Ambient Ghettos 2

One reason Apparition Poems got its title is that, between the spatial dimensions of different sectors of Philadelphia and its ornate architectural elegance, one gets the sense of ghosts, specters, and apparitions here, hanging in the air in a way that some find intoxicating, some do not. As I said about Temple University and the Eris Temple, those who find an interest in attraction/repulsion circuits (things, ocular vistas or otherwise, which attract and repel at the same time) will have much to ponder as they walk Philadelphia streets. Attraction/repulsion also leads, circuitously, to thoughts

of salvation and damnation; and who the saved and who the damned are is another pertinent Neo-Romantic subtext (beyond post-avant's obsession with mere edginess). If Philly has an interesting relationship (also) to philosophy, it is because the relationship of our architectural constructs to the sky, the heavens, and to a widely disparate scene on the ground, lends a sense of transcendentalism to the city, and to attempts to forge higher worlds, aesthetic and otherwise, from it. This is all leading to this Apparition Poem:

There are gusty showers
in Philadelphia, showers
that beat up empty lots,

down in sooty Kensington,
you could almost believe
what the books say about

being-in-the-world, I mean
being in a damned world, it
really does seem that day

on greasy days in Philadelphia.

The circular nature of the poem around Philadelphia-as-topos gives it an air of being self-enclosed, self-completed, a whole, round circuit. The circle involves time, temporality, which has as one of its more graceful manifestations the temporal circle, where (in whatever context) you finish where you started. One of the grand subtexts of Philadelphia— architecture versus time/the temporal and space— is mirrored here, as the scaffolding of the poem creates a square around the circle of the poem's temporal conceit. The “gusty showers” and “greasy days” of North Philadelphia depend, if we posit some aesthetic satisfaction in them, on a broadening of viewpoints towards a recognition that surfaces belie interiors, and what looks damned might actually be saved, and vice versa. This is Baudelairian territory— salvation and damnation are not English Romantic topoi that much— and the Philadelphian Prowler may well be more, in his/her *Noir* orientation, simpatico with the Symbolists then with those consonant with the replenishing powers of trees, birds, and flowers. To be forced into a kind of Purgatory, against century XX, by architecture— such is the fate (through Philly Free School and otherwise) of Philadelphia in 2014.

Dry Ice

The “dry ice” approach to serious poetry— I-it employed over I-thou— forms an interesting chiasmus with what I call Inter-Dialogism. When you want to jump over the hurdle of ordinary consciousness into the consciousness of another, however briefly, and if the Other in question is set at a natural distance from you, as can happen in many contexts, the result can be insight or a mystified sense of helplessness. Think how this works in terms of worldly power— militaries, judicial systems, governments— and how individuals who fall under the aegis of these conglomerate

interests are forced to make their points and gather their information. If you meet another personage, with the insignias of worldly power on them, one way or another, your attempt to make the Inter-Dialogic leap may or may not be hampered by timidity, reserve, prudence, intimidation, coercion, or a sense of being toppled by protocols. Often, if the Inter-Dialogic leap is to be made and the insight gleaned (leading to whatever further action the situation or context demands), it must happen quickly, once the powerful party has somehow been shocked into revealing themselves. Worldly power, as relates to the individual consciousness of those who bear it, can create a brain white-washed by its own armature of complexities and protocols, which make it so that, when both partners in a conversation have vested worldly interests, Inter-Dialogism is beleaguered by the dry ice of no intimacy whatsoever, and often, no brain symmetry (interchange of nations). Everything remains resolutely impersonal, even as, as everything created by the human brain, political armature must show cracks and strains, and those skilled at noticing those cracks and strains can make an Inter-Dialogic leap towards figuring out another consciousness. This all manifests in Apparition Poem 1345, from Apparition Poems:

Two hedgerows with a little path
between— to walk in the path like
some do, as if no other viable route
exists, to make Gods of hedgerows
that make your life tiny, is a sin of
some significance in a world where
hedgerows can be approached from
any side— I said this to a man who
bore seeds to an open space, and he
nodded to someone else and whistled
an old waltz to himself in annoyance.

The situation appears severe— the protagonist of the poem is spinning out an allegory for someone we assume to be a government or military functionary. The purport of the allegory is the idea that when the human race plans to move forward, forcing individuals to worship forces that degrade, abase, and trivialize their lives usually, and needlessly, disrupts human progress. As to why the Inter-Dialogic needs of the protagonist swerved him towards employing this allegory— the functionary's reaction would have to reveal, one way or another, at least a part of his brains, and thus make the situation more comprehensible to the protagonist. Thus, the whole Inter-Dialogic interchange has to happen without there being any personal emotion involved at all. Inter-Dialogic reactions dry iced this way, without any personal emotion, when represented in text, are a taste some may have more than others, just as the first, dry iced set of Apparition Poems may be preferable to some over the more personal Cheltenham Elegies. Here, what is set forth is a situation in which the functionary's

reaction— annoyance— leaves in enough ambiguity that the reader must decide for him or herself if a real Inter-Dialogic leap has been made or if the protagonist misjudged his adversary. He has attempted to initiate a battle of mystification— a sense that boundaries are being crossed, so that who is mystifying who becomes an open question. This reality is, as I said, political more than personal, just as the Elegies have politics built into them only on secondary levels. Why dry ice in serious poetry is interesting as an aesthetic effect is that most sensitive temperaments understand that the dry ice effect has its own aesthetic grandeur, just as Shelley's snow and ice storms in Mont Blanc are strangely, eerily gorgeous. As for 1345, the poem ends with the situation seemingly power-blocked; allegory told, allegory rejected; and yet we know that in politics, responses can germinate over long periods of time. Thus, the battle of mystification works for the reader too, who will be unable to predict either the precise context of this battle (no precise playing field, like Cheltenham) or how it may turn out in the end. The entire edifice is on ice.

Emotion and Inter-Dialogism

How do the emotions of individuals play into, or out of, Inter-Dialogism? To make an Inter-Dialogic leap into someone's brain and out again, and glean whatever you can, presupposes in the individual making the leap that personal emotions will not interfere with the process. Obviously, human consonance being what it is, this cannot always be the case. The murkiness of making an Inter-Dialogic leap while one's emotions are wreaking havoc with one's ability to perceive truth is a fact of life, both in literature (the more personal varieties of literature) and in our daily lives. In fact, the core essence of both Meta-Dialogism and Inter-Dialogism are threatened by their potential chiasmus with chaotic, disheveled, impenetrable emotions, and by the sense that without the objectivity that manifests along with emotional detachment, both of these leaps become mere leaps of faith, unsteadied by a relationship to what might be called intuitive empiricism. This plays out in poetry, literature, and drama, in the manifestation of unreliable narrators, characters desperate, destructive, unlucky, and emotionally unsteady enough so that, as intuitive as they might be, neither we as an audience nor they can ever really be sure they are drawing the right conclusions from whatever situation might be at hand. Inter-Dialogism is dogged by subjectivist interests every time, so that rose colored or dark colored spectacles take raw data and misshape them or configure them out of proportion. Apparition Poem 1488 is a case in point— a representation of a harsh situation— complete severance of contact with the beloved in question for the protagonist— with no reason given. Whatever Inter-Dialogic leaps have been made on both sides have led to stalemate; even as the protagonist, as besotted as he might be, must adopt the dry ice approach in discussing his predicament:

liquor store, linoleum
floor, wine she chose
 was always deep red,
 dark, bitter aftertaste,
 unlike her bare torso,
 which has in it
 all that ever was
 of drunkenness—
to miss someone terribly,
to both still be in love, as

she severs things because
 she thinks she must—
 exquisite torture, it's
 a different bare torso,
(my own) that's incarnadine—

We assume here that there have been Inter-Dialogic leaps on both sides. Yet, if these are two emotionally vulnerable, emotionally unstable individuals, what has been communicated from brain to brain cannot sink in and be assimilated the right way. This is especially the case if booze is involved, which confuses boundaries and senses of proportions and forces things to flow in a warped direction. That warpage gives 1488 an eerie glow, and an edge (hinging it back to what I used to call *post-avant* poetry) of strange dimensions and unclear leaps, unclear consciousness. The significance of the linoleum floor as a symbol is that it works as a synecdoche of all the different forms of warpage on offer here— alcoholism, emotional desperation, overactive imaginations, and (perhaps most tragically) Inter-Dialogic leaps which suggest both some purity of intention and some genuine psycho-affective chemistry, but which are getting trampled by the inhumanity of the landscape these characters inhabit. Linoleum floors are cold, un-homely, homogeneous surfaces, which reflect (also) the coldness of the complete severance between the two in question. The warm, companionable, sensuous side of drunken-heartedness— *vino veritas*, also— is being buried by consciousness which can no longer have stable reactions, so that what has been learned from the requisite Inter-Dialogic leaps knitting soul to soul cannot be recalled and skillfully employed the right way. It may be the case that the muse of 1488 knows this, and that it accounts for her severance of the relationship. If so, the protagonist has a ways and means of accessing a note of pure pathos, which resounds in the poem, even as he also reveals that his assumed mastery of his muse's heart, and what it has in it ("all that ever was/of drunkenness"), has to be false, because he seems not to know the reason for the sudden severance, which should be clear to him. When Inter-Dialogism is nullified by subjectivist interests, consciousness can fester and transform itself into all shapes and sizes of narcissistic delusion, even as the protagonist in 1488 attempts to reach beyond his narcissism.

I posit no boundary between us

The line in the title poem of *Posit* (I posit/no boundary/between us) is one I'd like to parse, in reference to what Neo-Romanticism is meant to be in the humanities world in 2017. If looked at objectively, an argument could be made that Modern art, post-modern art, and Deconstructionist literary theory are all largely constituted by a *succession of boundaries*, and a succession of boundaries effect. In other words, the works of art, and the texts, are a game and a gambit against both intimacy, and the possibility of intimacy, between reader/viewer and creator. Deconstructionism configures intimacy as naive, as both an intention and a possibility, largely through the perceived obtrusion of the arbitrary into language and linguistic significations. Modernity and post-modernity lean heavily on alienation tactics and irony motifs. To torque Wilde, the *importance of being earnest* is lost. Yet Deconstructionism must withstand its own contradictions; as Roland Barthes enumerates how we might be *seduced* by texts, it must be understood that what is seductive in textuality is, in itself, the possibility of writer/reader intimacy; and that intimacy can only be a viable possibility if what is arbitrary in language is balanced and offset by what in language and linguistic symbolization is *purposeful* (as Wordsworth would have it), and penetrant into the psyche of those who read and

experience the text.

Neo-Romanticism is, in fact, predicated on a belief in the efficacy of aesthetic symbolization, and (specifically), *the positing of no boundary between creator and viewer/reader*. Neo-Romanticism, on a primordial level (manifest, perhaps, from a ricochet to Philadelphia's buildings), believes in itself, and believes in its audience. Why the Dusie chap Posit, which ten years ago was ricocheting across the country for the first time, was more a statement of intention than I at first perhaps perceived, is because I failed to grasp the underpinnings of the work itself (and of The Posit Trilogy which came later) in regards to the primordial compact I unconsciously projected onto it, as I created it; a self-regulated, self-sustaining world of good faith, good intentions, and genial good will towards whoever might choose to read the text. The Neo-Romanticism which arose from Aughts Philadelphia does, in fact, attempt to take the first person singular and make it genial again. There cannot be a "you," a second person singular, without an "I"; and the significance of poetry's primordial perspective, an "I" addressing a "you," is that it becomes a Heideggerian sheltering device against what might corrupt it from without. The succession of boundaries effect embedded in Modern and post-modern art, the creation of more and more vast distances between reader/viewer and creator, is not an effect Neo-Romanticism finds interesting. Formality is another issue, and off the table here; but, suffice it to say, formality creates the inherent genial good will of a rich relationship to history and histories, continuity of consciousness over long stretches of time.

When formality is shifted into place as a prominent element of a literary text, as in The Witches of South Philadelphia, the genial good will of the artist is to, among other things, fulfill an imperative function that both Deconstruction and post-modernity largely lost: to entertain, edify, and enlighten the reader on the highest possible cognitive level. Readers read the poem because they enjoy it. This seems simple; it is not, in practice. Literature in the American Academy is so painfully onerous, as a Babel-level enterprise or (often) anti-enterprise, that literary types stick to books as a mode of self-abnegation and self-abasement. As a graduate student, I worked under a professor once, and I endeavored to bring this complex to the surface. We stick to these texts, I said, because we enjoy them; we study literature because we like it; correct? You'd be amazed that he was nonplussed enough that producing an answer seemed, to him, inadvisable and impossible. I never forgot the sense I had that here, folks, was an impostor; someone doing something for the wrong reason, whatever that reason might have been. Posit, The Posit Trilogy, Witches, and the rest are all aiming to cut out the proverbial middle man, academic or not.

Intimations of Immortality: Odes, Elegies, and Politics

The critical fallacy inheres in discussions of English Romanticism that Keats is the least political of the major Romantic poets. Ostensibly, Keats' subject matter is not directly political: the odal cycle or vision (and Hyperion in addition) addresses subjectivity, temporality and spatiality, history (classical antiquity), epistemology, and the poet's relationship to tactility, especially in the form of natural objects/vistas and expressed hetero sexuality. Yet, specifically in Ode to a Nightingale, a reckoning is enacted which takes Keats straight to the heart of a political dilemma which has plagued mankind

since classical antiquity and before: what is the place of extremely developed and expressed individuality, visionary individuality, as it were, in an individual, against the conformist masses, held under the protective aegis of conformist societal contexts? Adorno's "Lyric Poetry and Society" initiates many pertinent inquiries on this level. How I would like to elevate the discourse to the next plateau is to up a certain kind of discursive ante by tackling a trope which has lost some status over the last few hundred years, especially in the textual morasses created by, and around, post-structuralism: immortality. Specifically, as a topos to investigate in poetic texts and other literary contexts: who is more immortal, the visionary, with his or her extremely developed interiority, set in place against societal norms, or any generalized normative; and the ethos and praxis of the conformist masses themselves, with their standards of regulated behavior and (more importantly) regulated cognition. These issues present themselves nose on the face in the penultimate stanza of Nightingale:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn.

Nightingale puts Keats' entire visionary odal system on a tightrope, as he boldly confronts this its potential obsolescence. What makes the nightingale immortal, here, is its sense of being indistinguishable from all other nightingales, whether singing for Ruth or not. Those not touched by the stigma of extreme individuality (here of a visionary nature) have their safety and immortality in numbers; while an "I" developed to an absolute peak of sharp cognitive-affective incisiveness is so vulnerable, through its singularity into isolation, that it can only feel the pangs of mortality and impending death beating behind and in front of it at all times. The politics of this dilemma is simple: any given society must decide for itself to what extent individuals may develop themselves as distinct, autonomous entities, against the normative, or to what extent this process must be nipped in the bud. The critical commonplace of the isolated Romantic genius does apply here, as does Adorno; but what is added is the sense of potential longevity in configuring things from one end of this to the other: who gets to be immortal, Keats or his replicant, replaceable Nightingale? This fits snugly into (also) an exploration of the Cheltenham Elegies. The analogue to Nightingale, 261, manifests in no uncertain terms the same syndromes and dichotomies:

Never one to cut corners about cutting
corners, you spun the Subaru into a rough
U-turn right in the middle of Old York Road
at midnight, scaring the shit out of this self-
declared "artist." The issue, as ever, was

nothing particular to celebrate. We could only connect nothing with nothing in our private suburban waste land. Here's where the fun starts— I got out, motherfucker. I made it. I say "I," and it works. But Old York Road at midnight is still what it is. I still have to live there the same way you do.

The protagonist of the poem has the same sense of systematic, incisive insight as Keats does in the Odes. Here, the antagonist, who represents (among other things) the typical and the normative individual trapped in a society which values destructiveness and the continued predominance of crass, stunted lives, is not a Nightingale but the driver of the Subaru in question. For discursive sake, let's call him "Chris." Who Chris is, as an American archetype; the suburban daredevil or show-off, with the same blarneying sense of indestructibility, backed by the despair of immobile, low-minded interests; is meant to appear as immortal as the visionary poet, who laments in an elegiac way the pointlessness of the world as it exists for both characters. The problem here (or tightrope, over which the elegiac system must walk) is that, for those for whom major high art consonance is anathema, Chris will always remain a more eternal character than the autonomous, visionary artist.

What, or who, is immortal here is a political issue; not just because the masses tend to propel the masses forward, and Chris is resolutely one of the masses, but because even the notion of immortality-in-art (a fixation for both these Odes and Elegies) is a vulnerable one, before the mind-numbing force and obduracy of mass indifference and resentment (including the disdain of literary theory and theorists, post-structuralists, New Historicists and others). The Odes have been given a high place, over two hundred years, in the canon of English literature. The Cheltenham Elegies have only begun to have the life they are destined to have. Yet neither the Odes nor the Elegies are for the obdurate masses, who are (very much) eternally and immortally impervious to the siren call of advanced textuality. That high art is nonetheless a political force on high levels and for all time is also manifestly and demonstrably the case, no matter how eternally impervious the masses are. The artist must stand alone, with his or her visions, against the imperviousness of the masses; perhaps with a Romantic sense of sublimity, perhaps not; but the politics of Keats dictates that the politics of what endures, of what is meant to be immortal and what is not, of how far an individual may go to extend his or her individuality against the masses, is one which will remain a tightrope to be walked and a pertinent issue for as long as anyone wishes to create major high art consonant work.

Irony and the Elegies

As to what is revealed, in the Elegies, by Inter-Dialogism and Inter-Dialogic interactions— the leap of the consciousness of an individual into another's consciousness, and then out again— we have seen that all Inter-Dialogic revelations are merely partial. No one can see or reveal anyone else's brain in totem. But partial revelations are also conduits to revelations of irony— that what is revealed, what emerges on the surface, might be contradicted by something unseen, once the one

consciousness is repelled out of the other. A case in point, of irony emerging from Inter-Dialogism in the Elegies, is 420:

I.

The Junior Prom deposited me (and fifteen others) on the floor of her basement. I could barely see daylight at the time, and at three in the morning I began to prow. I was too scared to turn on any lights. She emerged like a mermaid from seaweed. I needed comfort, she enjoyed my need. We had gone out— she was bitter. The whole dialogue happened in shadows. No one was hooking up in the other room, either. You spiteful little princess.

II.

Whether off the bathroom counter
or the back of your hand, darling,
your unusual vehemence that
winter night, cob-webbed by
half-real figures, was animated by an
unfair advantage, which stooges threw
at you to keep you loopy as you
died piece-meal. All I had
was incomprehensible fury and a
broken heart— when I hit the floor
at four, you were getting ready
to play fire-starter, opened
the little snifter, curled your finger
twice in the right direction; darkness—

The way part one of the Elegy concludes— “You spiteful little princess”— suggests the emergence of a duality. The heroine/anti-heroine of the poem is, in the context of the poem, a spiteful little princess— yet, if she were only that, if she were a one-dimensional character with no dynamism built into her consciousness, would she be worth writing about? The same applies to the hero/anti-hero in 261; we know he brings his dare-devil streak to the surface, and that he reacts negatively to the Elegiac Protagonist pulling rank for his status as an artist in Cheltenham; yet the way 261 concludes establishes a kind of parity, so that the Elegiac Protagonist has ways and means of insinuating that there is more to this character than meets the eye. The surface level or layer of the character is then riddled with ironies, and the potentiality of /for drama, through shocks and surprises, as was true of Psyche in the early Aughts. Intuition is a key to these revelations— what Inter-Dialogic interactions reveal to intuition, the hidden depths of another’s consciousness, are what make the figures in the Elegies, hopefully, both compelling and dramatic. If I have succeeded, bombast has been avoided, as well; and the avant-garde principal against sentimentality and sickly preciousness upheld, even as narratives are established.

The aforementioned intuition is not just the writer’s, or the Elegiac Protagonist’s; it is something to be held and to function in the consciousness of the reader as well. How the reader reacts to the dramas in the Elegies depends on what intuitively strikes him or her as interesting or provocative. As

to what the dire battle is in 420, and whatever else the spiteful little princess might be hiding, the leap can be made also into what the Elegiac Protagonist wants from her here— what kind of comfort, physical or emotional, or both— and back into the position that she has certainly leapt into his brain, seen what she has seen and then been repelled back out again, and then acted accordingly, and spitefully. Does she have reason to be tiny-minded and spiteful? Readers need to act on their hunches and expand their consciousness into this frozen moment, and live out part of the drama between the two brains for themselves. Then, they can begin the labor of establishing, if they care to, who is more spiteful, and tiny-minded, amidst the Noir-consonant darkness.

Jenny Kanzler

I met the painter Jenny Kanzler in 2008. I was sitting in the Last Drop one weekend afternoon in April or May, working, and she approached me and introduced herself. She was very pretty in a cherubic way, not unlike Abby Heller-Burnham. Over the course of 2008, we had coffee many times. I wouldn't call these tete-a-tetes dates— Jenny was otherwise engaged— but we got to know each other with some thoroughness. Jenny, both in her paintings and in her life, had a fascination with “the stunted,” in general terms— stunted people, stunted situations, even stunted animals (she found tarantulas "exquisite.") She also had a fetish for violence and gore— the films she liked were violent, and the art. Jenny had been at PAFA along with Abby and Mary, but she usually declined to discuss them. I got the distinct impression that they were not among her favorite artists there. Mary's *The Fall* was showing at PAFA precisely when I met Jenny Kanzler, in fact. She gave it a mixed review. There was some sexual tension in the air between myself and Ms. Kanzler, but she made clear that she was mostly a Platonic soul. Abby and Mary were floridly liberated, eroticized, and romantic in comparison, despite Jenny's attractiveness. Yet, Jenny did have a singular mind and a singular vision. She made a strong impression on me. It seemed to me that the substitution, in Jenny's art, of violence for love and sex was a deliberate one, but (this was my own prejudice) not necessarily a healthy one. Jenny's penchant for violent, rather than sexual, smut, was what inspired *Apparition Poem 1342*, along with the sense, mistaken or not, that Jenny was sublimating so that the part of her psyche which wanted her to remain a stunted little girl would stay untouched, unchallenged, and inviolable:

What's in what eyes?
What I see in hers is
mixed greenish silence,
somewhat garish, it's
past girlish (not much),
but I can't touch her
flesh (set to self-destruct),
anymore than she can
understand the book
her cunt is, that no one
reads directly, or speaks
of, there's no love other
than “could be,” but I
think of her throat cut—
that's her slice of smut.

The phenomenological import of the poem is a torque of Elegy 414— I privilege myself to do a break-in into Jenny’s brain, and have a look around. The problem with phenomenological break-ins is that it is difficult to ascertain whether what you are seeing is real, is really someone else’s brain, or if what you find is just a projection of your own fantasies. It could be that Jenny’s “slice of smut” is more involved in real emotion and intellection, not just a product of stunted adolescence, but there was no way for me to tell, as I was writing, whether this was the case or not. In fact, I believe the break-in in 1342 is brash enough, pompous enough, even, as a male narrator violating a woman, that this Apps Protagonist seems like a half-pig. If he is correct in his assumptions, however, his piggishness has still won him intercourse with a woman who has denied him conventional entrance. It is worth noting that I didn’t fight Jenny this way— no passes were made, nor did I have the experience of falling in love with her— but the bullying energy to understand her made for some strange, loopy mind games between us, and our gaming against each other on cognitive levels lasted a few years.

To broaden the context— by 2008, the Recession era was starting to sink in, and much of the grandeur of Aughts Philly, the romance and the sense of freedom, were beginning to fade. For Jenny Kanzler to enter my life at the time she did, and for us to become sparring partners rather than lovers, was a sign of the times for me, an inversion of the odal early Aughts, and some of the hard-won victories of the mid-Aughts, too. A beacon also, perhaps, inverse-shining towards a realization of the Great Recession, and what it was to become. It’s also germane for me that by 2008, an emergent, notable Philadelphia painter’s generalized equation involved violence, gore, and the stunted to sexualized expressiveness; where all of America was headed was into a meat-grinder of violence, moral/ethical bankruptcy, and generally entropic conditions, and those of us who wanted the Aughts, which facilitated art around sex and romance, to go on forever, were to be bitterly disappointed.

Kierkegaard and Dry Ice

The complex relationship between Inter-Dialogism and philosophy cannot be simply or succinctly enumerated. When consciousness leaps into other consciousness, the basic questions of phenomenology remain the same— what is inside our consciousness, what is outside, what is held or bounded in or by consciousness, and what is not— only issues of individuation, difference, and distinction manifest to lead any inquiry into any number of both theoretical and semantic quagmires. When philosophical issues are addressed in serious poetry, the potential and actual arabesques out into cognitive space become innumerable, especially when Inter-Dialogism is used in a new capacity. What happens when, as often happens in philosophy, allegorical figures are employed? From Socrates to Zarathustra to Abraham, philosophical texts must lean on symbolic representations of individuals, to delineate the essences of philosophical dilemmas and interests. Abraham, we know, was Kierkegaard’s major choice is his most pivotal text— Fear and Trembling— and he, as an author, asks us, as an implicit “you” in an I-thou relationship, to attempt to leap into Abraham’s consciousness when the Lord asks him to climb the mountain and sacrifice his son, seemingly for no reason, and testing Abraham’s faith, sharpening his faculties of perception. Apparition Poem 1613 subsists as both an interpretive vista onto Kierkegaard and a tangential representation of an implicit “I” who has been able, it would seem, to achieve the requisite Inter-Dialogic leap into Abraham’s

consciousness, though we know Abraham to only be a figure in an allegory, rather than a partner in any intimacy:

Follow Abraham up the hill:
to the extent that the hill is
constituted already by kinds
of knives, to what extent can
a man go up a hill, shepherd
a son to be sacrificed, to be
worthy before an almighty
power that may or may not
have had conscious intentions

where hills, knives, sons were
concerned, but how, as I watch
this, can I not feel that Abraham,
by braving knives, does not need
the one he holds in his rapt hands?

What the implicit I sees in 1613 is a kind of loop around unconscious processes of governance—that God himself may rule the Universe from a center of consciousness or not, and that the subtle mental strength Abraham gains from contact with this Universe Force unconsciously begins to direct his thoughts and actions, which take on consonance with being sharp, incisive, knife-like. The final loop, we see, is that, in a binding chain, the “I” in the poem becomes sharp, incisive, and knife-like from Inter-Dialogic interaction with Abraham (and it is implicit by this time that Inter-Dialogic interactions may happen with characters in allegories and their unseen creators, as well as flesh and blood people), who has inherited his incisiveness from the Universe Force whose consciousness or unconsciousness cannot be gauged or mastered. If the dry ice rule applies here, as it does for most of Apparition Poems, it is because all philosophy, as heavy as it is on intellect and allegory, is touched by dry ice, and I-you queries ride shot-gun to the objectivism which must drive the enterprise forward and turn the proverbial steering wheel. Is some real I-thou intimacy mixed in? To answer this brings us to a philosophical critical crux which is very strange— strange, in 1613, because the protagonist seems to be (mystically, uncannily) attempting an Inter-Dialogic leap into our brain, as he (unconsciously) sees what he sees, and steps back out again, leaving a sense behind that philosophical awareness can be governed by unconscious processes and impersonal forces all the way through, just as many of the most salient Big Questions, both for science and philosophy, are impersonal ones, and can only be conjectured at in an impersonal, if not unconscious, manner. The implied “you” in 1613 is rather rare (and an interesting parallel to the “you” Saint Augustine is eventually granted in *The Posit Trilogy*), and demanded by a literary context; a merely philosophical context would stay in the third person; but, in attempting a bridge and a chiasmus between philosophy and literature, and, as is also the case in 1617, aids the reader in feeling a sense of humanity amidst all the objectivism and dry ice. Yet, the contradiction inheres that in addressing the Big Questions on any profound level, it is almost always individual consciousness which is able to produce breakthroughs in science and philosophy, cloaked in the impersonality and objectivity (governed, also, often unconscious processes) of the third person. If poetry is able to enter this game seriously, the first person singular must re-make itself as explicit, and personal, to give whatever construct is at hand the insignia of the aesthetic (including poetry's imperative-to-song), and allow the reader graceful entrance.

Melopoeia and Time

The tradition in serious poetry, of poets anthropomorphizing impersonal forces (Love, Time, Beauty) is a rich one, even if it fell into disuse in the twentieth century. John Keats, for example, will always address impersonal forces like Love, Time, and Beauty in a personalized, I-thou manner. He thusly imposes on the aesthetic context the resolutely personal (odal) world which is his insignia. The Modernists and post-modernists found Keats, and Romanticism, naïve for this anthropomorphizing proclivity; yet, the tunnel vision they imposed on poetry, involving the hegemonic power of the impersonal, objective, and synthetic, shuts down the humanistic and the imaginative in a surfeit of emptiness and unmusical banality. As for how this issue is dealt with in Apparition Poems— if Time, for instance, is to be anthropomorphized— one compromise solution involves taking Time and making it a dry iced, impersonal “it” in an I-it chiasmus situation. Thus, the perceived gaucherie of making everything personal is avoided, even if a confession is also made that impersonal forces like Time may stand in Inter-Dialogic relationships with our consciousness, metaphorically jumping into our brains and making incisions, not out of a conscious will, but out of unconscious, emanated power (like the God-force adumbrated in 1613). Time, of course, is merely (as Kant teaches us) an intuition, something our brain imposes on what matter is empirically given to us, and also an aid to register perceptible changes in matter. The problem, for the poet swimming in these waters, is that human consciousness generates emotions about these processes. So, we have Apparition Poem 1067:

I want to last—
to be the last
of the last of
the last to be

taken by time,
but the thing
about time is
that it wants,

what it wants
is us, all of us
wane quickly
for all time's

ways, sans “I,”
what I wants—

One of the oddities here is that melopoeia, and melopoeiac tension/release games, compensate for the frustration of the protagonist's circular Inter-Dialogic interaction with time as an impersonal force, impinging on his consciousness. The music manifests in clusters, which is one accustomed manner/mode of melopoeiac practice, and in end-rhymes as well. The Inter-Dialogic tension here—the knowledge that anthropomorphized time “wants,” in an impersonal fashion, to co-opt and destroy everything I, as an individual, either have or have created— makes it so that the poem, which begins with “I want” and finishes with “I wants,” has in it a sense of metaphysical exploration

of combined interactions between personal and impersonal forces, what has perceptible bounds and what does not. The problem with the poem anthropomorphizing Time is that the poet's instinct to do so, though it jibes with his aesthetic intentions, must nonetheless be riddled with the doubts and inconsistencies of consciousness reaching too far past itself, and its own empirical understanding. The principles of pure reason— Kant's top rung of what human cognition can achieve— can only speak of Time as an intuitive force in human consciousness, and not strictly knowable past that. We do not know if Time-forces inhere in the universe which manifest some form of consciousness or personality. They might. To the extent that the poem sketches a semantic and melopoeiac circle in space, where the end and the beginning are rough parallels, what is suggested is a sense of stalemate with an impersonal force which cannot help but touch us, in both Inter-Dialogic interactions and out, while also manifesting evidence that no consciousness can inhere in it, and the personal and the impersonal become so hopelessly intermixed that the poem gets lost in its own music. To be lost in melopoeia, while also dry iced by an I-it perspective, makes the poem its own kind of hybrid, built of parts which ache to transcend their limitations and know what is not readily known, even as what is shown to consciousness here is frightening and frustrating.

Menace and Foreboding

One subtext of the entire enterprise of the Cheltenham Elegies is that the significations of the American suburbs must change. From the dulcet and the banal, the suburbs acquire an aura of menace and foreboding. How the menace and the foreboding are incorporated into our view of the American suburbs connects directly to Inter-Dialogism. What happens when the leap from one consciousness into another is made, and what is seen is perceived to be a direct threat to the individual who initiates the leap? This may happen in a number of different contexts, including social situations in which individuals are not only required to keep their cool, but to maintain the wonted placid façade that is the suburban insignia. Even more murky are situations in which the individual who makes the Inter-Dialogic leap perceives a genuine threat, with some genuine intimacy snuck in on another side of things— in other words, the insignia of betrayal. This goes beyond mere troubled brotherhood, into a place in which the drama of life and death is so intricately complex and elaborately woven that everything (again) is lost in ambiguity, and love and hate are impossible to distinguish. This is where the individual with Inter-Dialogic tendencies (like the Elegiac Protagonist) gets beaten back with his or her own limitations— emotions take over, and where there is any sensitivity, it is lost in confusion and despair. Keats inverts this process, in the Odes, into being lost in a haze of sexualized, musical ecstasy— the Odes and Elegies find two parallel lines towards consciousness losing itself, in self-transcendence towards dissolution into higher realities. As the Elegies' blackness meets the Odes' whiteness in the Gyan chap, a foundation is built of wonder around the possibilities of poetic language. Yet, in Elegy 260, we finally come face to face with the brick wall in all the Cheltenham characters' consciousness— they cannot let go of their pasts, and replay all the most important scenes of menace and foreboding in their heads endlessly, in an eternal loop:

I was too stoned to find the bathroom.
The trees in the dude's backyard made
it look like Africa. You were my hook-up
to this new crowd. The same voice, as always,
cuts in to say you were fucked up even

then. You had a dooming Oedipal complex. We were all wrapped tight, even when we got high. I was the only one getting any, so you both mistrusted me. African trees & easy camaraderie. A primitive pact sealed between warring factions— my spears (take this as you will) for your grass.

The characters here need to have an intuition, a sixth sense. The need to be able to intuit who around them is for real and who isn't. The problem with the Elegiac Protagonist here is that he isn't completely simpatico with them. He appears to be an accessory to them, and nothing more. Yet, his sixth sense informs him in this memorized loop ("The same voice, as always...") that he is being betrayed somehow by someone he cares about, probably the hero/anti-hero from 261, and there is nothing at all he can do about it. Elegy 260 is rather unique, among the Elegies, because it does not come to any definite conclusions; in fact, the poem ends before the action starts, leaving the readers to configure for themselves what the nature of the action exactly is, and what the betrayals might be. When betrayal of individuals is involved, Inter-Dialogism becomes profoundly horrible, a waking nightmare which brands individual minds for all time with the decisive moments which made or broke them. The funny twist involved in 260 involves sex— that if the Elegiac Protagonist is about to be excluded from something important, his success with women is what may be standing in his way, which has caused hatred and resentment to migrate towards him, and this betrayal. In the suburbs, the fates of individuals are often decided sotto voce, and in the kind of accents which may accompany the reading of weather on TV or a game show host's opening monologue. Quietness and stillness do not preclude viciousness and petty larceny to souls. All the menace and foreboding built into Cheltenham as a construct have to do with these levels, and with the sad, sick sense that suburban deaths are potentially as banal as suburban lives. That the Elegiac Protagonist lived to tell his tale cannot efface the Inter-Dialogic horror of whatever he sees in his friend's brain here, and the Meta-Dialogic defense mechanism voice he has developed to counter it ("you were fucked up even/ then"). Where this leaves Inter-Dialogism is a variegated place which can cover the gamut of human thoughts and emotions. Elegy 260's version of Inter-Dialogism is one of the hardest, and also the most realistic— in Cheltenham, as in much of the rest of the human world, human life, often claimed to have some sanctity inhering in it, is actually, in practice, as cheap as a dime, and treated with the extreme lowliness of those who live in the dirt.

Noir Resonances

Built into Apparition Poems as a literary construct, and as a textual embodiment of what I call a "noir" or "deep noir" sensibility, under the aegis of the Neo-Romantic (and of post-avant behind it), are resonances from poem to poem, and from poem-sequence to poem-sequence. You could call these resonances textual "games" of a sort, and when two or more poems game with or against each other, the resonances between motifs, linguistic structures, and approaches to textual development highlight, in microcosmic form, what constitutes the text as an epic in fragments. Here, I would like to investigate the game between two Apparition Poems— 1341 and 1488— and thus demonstrate how a representative Apparition Poem game works. The motifs I see intermixed in this game— drunkenness/intoxication, possible alcoholism, Philadelphia as a site for both interpersonal drama and textual creation, heterosexual (here) games between men and women, over both sexual and

psycho-affective issues, and an unnamed epic protagonist's relationship with language itself, and with his own cognitive capacities— recur throughout this *nouveau epic* text, and as it weaves its wayward course, this particular nexus serves to underline the labyrinthine depths (and heights) towards which the text attempts to ascend:

Secrets whispered behind us
have a cheapness to bind us
to liquors, but may blind us
to possibilities of what deep
secrets are lost in pursuit of
an ultimate drunkenness that
reflects off surfaces like dead
fishes at the bottom of filthy
rivers— what goes up most is
just the imperviousness gained
by walking down streets, tipsy,
which I did as I said this to her,
over the Schuylkill, two fishes.

liquor store, linoleum
floor, wine she chose
 was always deep red,
 dark, bitter aftertaste,
 unlike her bare torso,
 which has in it
 all that ever was
 of drunkenness—
to miss someone terribly,
to both still be in love, as
she severs things because
 she thinks she must—
 exquisite torture, it's
 a different bare torso,
(my own) that's incarnadine—

The motif of drinking/drunkenness has to occur throughout *Apparition Poems*— the characters who inhabit the text tend to be excessive rather than moderate, and indulgent rather than abstemious. Why 1341 and 1488 both make incisions into the nature of drunkenness— “ultimate drunkenness” and “all that ever was of drunkenness”— is that drunkenness is seen not to be simple but complex, a multi-tiered state of consciousness which might move consciousness itself (and the relationship of consciousness to language) in any number of different directions. Yet, the dark-hewn nature of *Apparition Poems*, its stance in shade rather than light, draws us to the abyss that whatever the “all” of drunkenness is, it must be redeemed in our re-exploration of states of drunkenness in text, not necessarily as a state of consciousness in itself. The obvious facets of the drunkenness game here— that social contexts and sexualized relationships can drive us to drink in 1341, and that some humans choose to dwell permanently in drunken states of psycho-affective torpor in 1488— are undergirded by a meta-consonant sense that engagement in certain forms and levels of textuality have “all that ever was of drunkenness” built into them, and that the seemingly sober composer of

the two poems has inhering a drunken sense of the possibilities of dual meanings and other games as redemptive of/for the self-respect of cognition, and its possible enchantments, of which drunkenness is one. “Drunkenness” is also a specialized version of Philadelphia; as a city of romance and intrigue, intoxication, passion. Aughts Philadelphia was, in the broad sense of the word, romantic— freedoms to indulge were enjoyed there.

On another front: the sense of heterosexual, sexualized relationships between men and women— one of the backbones of serious art for the length of human history— had been edited out of serious avant-garde poetry a long time before my arrival, for no good reason and against the natural proclivities of most would-be poets. I have no problems with queerness or queer art whatsoever— many of my Aughts Philadelphia compadres were queer— but I felt that, for myself and for the greater good of the art-form, a re-introduction of passionate, sexualized (“experienced”) hetero interest would be both healthy and germane to this text’s sense of itself (sentience) as an epic (the formula works also for ballads and other forms, as in *The Ballad of Robert Johnson*). Sexualized, hetero relationships with drunken, semi-alcoholic Philly as a background, sequestered in the racy Aughts, up the tactile ante against the merely cognitive, or even merely cognitive-affective, gaining an upper hand; and these two Apparition Poems together seem to be about the same relationship. That the relationship is tempestuous, encounter based, and also hinged to a secret-whispering social nexus, add a broad range of coloration and perspective tricks which make the poems work in an engine like way together, towards the conclusion of 1488 in heartbreak and a sense of entropic loss.

The loss, it should be noted, is epic, even if rooted in a series of fragments— pitched to a high frequency both of intellect (level after level of semantic scaffolding from line to line) and of emotion. The sense of gravitas-in-passion, mixed in with sex, booze, and Aughts Philly energy, is uniquely situated so that some audiences will miss the intricate sense of the poems as word-machines, systematically checking and balancing themselves for achieving the unique, simultaneous prosodic effect of maximum coherence/maximum complexity.

Notes: Elegy 420/St. Agnes Eve

The twentieth century didn’t bequeath us much, literature-wise. But I do like T. S. Eliot’s famous aphorism: “Immature artists borrow; mature artists steal.” The Cheltenham Elegy I would like to discuss does steal a crucial image from Keats’ “The Eve of St. Agnes.” If you put the Elegy next to the relevant stanza of Keats’ longer narrative poem (not an Ode, but sharing the Odes preoccupation with celebrating oddities and inverting poetic clichés), what emerges is a paradigm model of where the last two hundred years have landed us, as regards what constitutes innocence and experience, virginity and consummation, expectancy and satiety, and what historians chose to call Romance against what I choose to call Noir:

I.

The Junior Prom deposited me (and fifteen others) on the floor of her basement. I could barely see daylight at the time, and at three in the morning I began to prowl. I was too scared to turn on any lights. She emerged like a mermaid from seaweed. I needed comfort, she enjoyed my need. We had gone out— she was bitter. The whole

dialogue happened in shadows. No one was hooking up in the other room, other. You spiteful little princess.

II.

Whether off the bathroom counter
or the back of your hand, darling,
your unusual vehemence that
winter night, cob-webbed by
half-real figures, was animated by an
unfair advantage, which stooges threw
at you to keep you loopy as you
died piece-meal. All I had
was incomprehensible fury and a
broken heart— when I hit the floor
at four, you were getting ready
to play fire-starter, opened
the little snifter, curled your finger
twice in the right direction; darkness—

Anon his heart revives: her vespers done,
Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
Half-hidden, like a mermaid in seaweed,
Passive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,
But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.

Oddly enough, Eliot's mermaids in "Prufrock" occupy a median space between Keats' innocent, angelic Madeline, and my "spiteful little princess." Eliot aside, both "St. Agnes" and 420 involve festivities— and the celebration of St. Agnes Eve in the Middle Ages (where Keats acquired his narrative plot) was just as garish and ostentatious as a Cheltenham Junior Prom. Yet, the Elegy and the semi-Ode share a preoccupation shared, as a concern, by myself and Keats— what happens in darkness, in hidden or concealed spaces, far from the proverbial madding crowd, against what would be known on the surface levels of society and its terms of acceptance or acknowledgment. Porphyro is asking for an elopement, and is accepted; the first person protagonist of 420 asks for solace, on any level, and is rebuffed. That both poems emerge as fully sexualized, on a hetero level, is foregrounded by this comparison— a mermaid is a kind of siren, and carries feminine glamour with her wherever she goes, even in darkness (underwater, perhaps, in this tableaux).

420 foregrounds this ambiguity— is the protagonist asking for sex (a renewal of what has been extinguished, in the poem), or just a loving verbal interchange, or both? He receives, from his mermaid, neither, while Porphyro eventually receives both. That is a critical crux between Romanticism and Noir, as a new mode of visionary Realism (which carries under its aegis, also, post-avant)— many stereotypically Romantic poems end happily, with a sense that conflicts have ended in a kind of fulfillment, textual or narrative, intellectual, emotional, or physical. The bleakness of Noir (or post-avant) significations guarantees that what is anodyne in Romanticism can never

appear— and readers may find Noir either airless and claustrophobic or Romanticism weak and cloying. Now, Romanticism is a major, vital, complex movement, so that variability of signification still applies; but, reliably, that the English Romantics, even the “Satanic” second generation (Keats, Byron, Shelley) were positivists in comparison to Noir Apparition Poems like the Cheltenham Elegies would be difficult to deny.

Back to the two poems: the two versions of adolescence, one British and one American, one in third-person omniscient and one in first, are a study between adolescence retaining its wonted luster of freshness, joy, surprise, self-discovery, and unselfconscious risk, or adolescence degenerating into the space of already-thwarted dreams, premature (even atrophied) adulthood, and a sense of the crepuscular towards realizations of mortality even before adulthood is officially reached. This is part of what the Cheltenham Elegies are for— to acknowledge the ludicrousness of adolescents leading their lives like little adults, fornicating, wheeling and dealing, wielding material power in inappropriate ways, and attempting to cope with these realities in the total darkness (“basement”) of non-existent family structures and no real guidance. The acknowledgement is made looking back, in elegiac fashion, rather than the front-lines reportage style of Answered Prayers, which covers similar ground (prematurely ripened adolescence) Symbolically (i.e. in the hallucinatory manner of the French Symbolists). It is an interesting torque, and one I did not necessarily plan, between Madeline emerging from her clothes “in” seaweed (while Porphyro watches her from her closet), while my antagonist emerges “from” the seaweed of what? Another shady tete-a-tete, or round of gossip?

Keats’ version of “seaweed” is merely an optical illusion (i.e. that’s how she looks to Porphyro from his vantage point in her closet), while my “seaweed” is a metaphor for an entire way of life— kids bedraggled by onerous, gross practical realities which cling to them whether they like it or not. The “mansion foul” where Madeline lives as a ward is (we may guess) no less corrupt than an average house in mostly upper-middle class Cheltenham; yet Madeline has retained her innocence. My anti-heroine swims through seaweed-strewn waters, and is far from innocent. If she is spiteful, it is because others are spiteful to her, leading to an accustomed nihilistic Cheltenham chain reaction. So that, the steal I made, to transpose something from the Romantic canon into a Noir reality, inverts but also sheds light on where English language poetry is willing to go in the twenty-first century, which is into the total darkness of the American landscape, where the only joy is telling the truth about what shadows you happen to encounter. Elegy 420 also acts as an adequate presaging as to how the Great Recession will impose its strictures upon American individuals in the two-thousand Teens.

Phenomenology: Cheltenham Elegies

To introduce the inquiry into phenomenology and phenomenological interest in the Cheltenham Elegies, I would like to include, in its totality, Apparition Poem #414, which is placed early in the 2012 Blazevox print book Cheltenham:

And out of this nexus, O sacred
scribe, came absolutely no one.
I don’t know what you expected
to find here. This warm, safe,

comforting suburb has a smother
button by which souls are unraveled.
Who would know better than you?
Even if you're only in the back of
your mind asphyxiating. He looked
out the window— cars dashed by
on Limekiln Pike. What is it, he said,
are you dead or do you think you're Shakespeare?

The chiasmus and comparison with Keats' Odes: the preponderant weight, in the Elegies, of humanism over formalism and drama over prosody establishes that the Elegiac Protagonist consolidate an identity over and against the identity of the Odal Protagonist. The "I" here is social, and brings his phenomenological biases and concerns into a social context. In 414, the Elegiac Protagonist is confronted with an Antagonist who sets into motion his own phenomenological interest or gambit. As per this phenomenological movement— the Antagonist in 414 maintains the conceit that he has made cognitive boundaries dissolve and has entered, and is speaking from within, the Elegiac Protagonist's mind ("Who would know better than you?/ Even if you're only in the back of/ your mind asphyxiating"). His conceits are thus multiple— first, that such a cognitive break-in is possible— that, by a phenomenological movement, one human mind can break into and inhabit another with authority— second, that the Antagonist has successfully jumped into and inhabited the mind of the Elegiac Protagonist— third, that he has not only broken into but (Zen) mastered this mind. He is magically in possession not only of his mind, but of someone else's.

In 414, tensions and ambiguities around this phenomenological confrontation are left open and unresolved— to what extent the Antagonist has (Zen) mastered the Protagonist's mind is not addressed. The truth, were it aired, might be quantifiable— as in, his mind is 50% mastered, or 60 or 70— but we are left to surmise these calculations for ourselves. It is also important to remember that this attempted cognitive break-in works as a metaphor for Cheltenham itself, both as an external, physical reality and as, on a phenomenological level, a mindscape for the Protagonist. The phenomenological reality of Cheltenham, for individuals, is that it is a dystopia of hostile aggression and violence, but also (conversely) of the mind's enchantment with darkness, deterioration, and decay. The included concrete detail, of cars dashing by on Limekiln Pike, fulfills a specific function in the Elegy— it breaks the phenomenological tension (whether the Antagonist speaks from within the Protagonist's mind or not), and enumerates how an enclosed circuit (mind to mind) has been broken by an impersonal, outside the mind reality (cars, Limekiln Pike), demonstrating as well the obdurate hardness of outside the mind realities (the drabness of cars and of Limekiln Pike), and that the Antagonist now (rightly or wrongly) feels himself moved back into his own mind. Important with Keats: his outside the mind realities are almost always beautiful, conventionally enchanting ones (forests, mountains, birds, trees, etc). Outside the mind realities in the Cheltenham Elegies tend to be cold, hard, eerie, or even repulsive ones; but redeemed by superior truthfulness as regards humanity and the human condition. Back to 414: once the attempted cognitive break-in ends, and the phenomenological tension (mind against mind) disperses, a sense of discretion is restored to the vignette. That the final interrogative iteration more or less concedes non-mastery is significant— and once again, because the answer to the question is left unspoken, the ambiguities and tensions of

phenomenological combat (who is more inside the other's head) are left intact, alongside other levels inhering in the poem, such as its clustered approach to melopoeia.

Phenomenology: Cheltenham Elegies (2)

In Elegy 261, there is a preponderant weight affixed to outside the mind realities (initially), and the imposition of outside the mind realities on the interior terrain of innocent kids:

Never one to cut corners about cutting
corners, you spun the Subaru into a rough
U-turn right in the middle of Old York Road
at midnight, scaring the shit out of this self-
declared "artist." The issue, as ever, was
nothing particular to celebrate. We could
only connect nothing with nothing in our
private suburban waste land. Here's where
the fun starts— I got out, motherfucker.
I made it. I say "I," and it works. But Old
York Road at midnight is still what it is.
I still have to live there the same way you do.

In an American suburb like Cheltenham, the landscape is mostly occupied by nothingness places— homogenized, generic strip malls and thoroughfares, along with neighborhood after neighborhood of undistinguished homes, parks, and schools. It is an outside the mind reality of entrenched nothing and nothingness— places which not only mean nothing to anyone, but which were specifically designed and manufactured to mean nothing to anyone— hostile places for kids with brains and imagination. Old York Road is the archetypal suburban pivot point— supporting commerce, facilitating different forms of traffic, but generic enough to guarantee that cognitive-affective attachment to Old York Road is extremely unlikely for those who use it. Connecting nothing with nothing, in 261, manifests the process by which the human mind, surrounded by nothing and nothingness outside the mind realities (soulless realities), internalizes nothingness also as an interior reality; having, under the weight of perpetual imposition, no choice but to do so. Once the nothingness of the suburban landscape is internalized, the mind's affective and imaginative capacities grow numb, and subsist in a state of dormant torpor. When the hero/anti-hero of 261 pulls his rough u-turn in Old York Road, it is both to demonstrate rebellion against internalized nothingness and to (by risking death) express complicity with it. It is an ambiguous gesture, which also encompasses expression of an internal landscape incompletely homogenized with Cheltenham's outside the mind tacility.

This is why, ultimately, 261 is a poem about, and Elegy for, brotherhood— neither character is so absorbed and assimilated into nothingness (Cheltenham) that a sense of humanity is lost, and the drama of the poem inheres of watching the Elegiac Protagonist connect (as an inversion) the

“something” of bold-if-foolhardy rebellion against nothingness with the something of his own artistic triumph. Whether the hero/anti-hero has established an “I” which “works” we cannot determine. What we see, by the end of the twelfth line, is both triumphant and tragic— it is inferred that nothingness, when internalized at a young age, is impossible to completely eradicate in human consciousness— thus, the Elegiac Protagonist still lives, on an internal cognitive-affective level, in a space vulnerable to the inferred plague. Over the course of the Elegy, we watch as Old York Road begins outside the mind and makes a phenomenological transition inside, moves from physical to metaphysical textual subsistence— and signifies identical nothingness realities in both realms. Likewise, between the two friends, the drama is initiated in physical reality and dissolves into a metaphysical or phenomenological drama between two interiors— who has managed to expel, and thus transcend, the most nothingness, and who has manifested more presence in the world. The Fancy-equivalent in this Elegy (to lasso in Keats’ terminology) is this phenomenological dissolution from outside the mind into the mind’s interior (a confrontation, rather than a break-in as in 414), from the physical into the metaphysical (especially as regards Old York Road, what it is), and the felt truthfulness of this dissolution, even if (as in 414), we complete the Elegy surrounded by unresolved tensions and ambiguities (never learning the current “location,” inside or outside, of the hero/anti-hero), and the omnipresence of the banal.

Preface: Apparition Poems

Though no sustained narrative buoys it up, Apparition Poems is meant to be sprawling, and epic. An American epic, even one legitimate on world levels, could only be one made up of disparate, seemingly irreconcilable parts— such a state of affairs being America’s, too. The strains which chafe and collide in Apparition Poems are discrete— love poems, carnal poems, meta-poems, philosophical poems, etc. Forced to cohabitate, they make a clang and a roar together (or, as Whitman would have it, a “barbaric yawp”) which creates a permanent (for the duration of the epic) sense of dislocation, disorientation, and discomfort. This is enhanced by the nuances of individual poems, which are often shaped in the dialect of multiple meanings and insinuation. Almost every linguistic sign in Apparition Poems is bifurcated; either by the context of its relationship to other linguistic signs in the poems, or by its relationship to the epic whole of the book itself. If Apparition Poems is an epic, it is an epic of language; the combative adventure of multiple meanings, shifting contexts and perspectives, and the ultimate despair of the incommensurability of artful utterance with practical life in an era of material and spiritual decline. It is significant that the poems are numbered rather than named; it emphasizes the fragmentary (or apparitional) nature of each, its place in a kind of mosaic, rather than a series of wholes welded together by chance or arbitrary willfulness (as is *de rigueur* for poetry texts).

This is the dichotomy of Apparition Poems— epics, in the classical sense, are meant to represent continuous, cohesive action— narrative continuity is essential. Apparition Poems is an epic in fragments— every poem drops us, in *medias res*, into a new narrative. If I choose to call Apparition Poems an epic, not in the classical (or Miltonic) sense but in a newfangled, American mode (which nonetheless maintains some classical conventions), it is because the fragments together create a

magnitude of scope which can comfortably be called epic. The action represented in the poems ranges from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the heroic to the anti-heroic; there are dramatic monologues set amidst the other forms, so that the book never strays too far from direct and directly represented humanism and humanistic endeavor. The American character is peevish if not able to compete— so are the characters here. Life degenerates into a contest and a quest for victory, even in peaceful or solitary contexts. Yet, if the indigenous landscape is strange and surrealistic, it is difficult to maintain straightforward competitive attitudes— consciousness has to adjust while competing, creating a quandary away from the brazen singularity which has defined successful, militaristic America in the world.

Suddenly, American consciousness is beleaguered by shifting sands and multiple meanings— an inability, not only to be singular but to perceive singular meanings. Even as multiplications are resisted, everything multiplies, and often into profit loss, rather than profit gain. The epic, fragmentary narrative of *Apparition Poems* is a down-bound, tragic one, rather than a story of valor or heroism. The consolation for loss of material consonance is a more realistic vision of the world and of human life— as a site of/for dynamism, rather than stasis, of/for multiplicity, rather than singularity. *Apparition Poems* is a vista into “multiple America” from Philadelphia, its birth-place, and a city beleaguered also by multiple visions of itself. No city in America has so much historical heft; nor did any American city suffer so harsh a demotion in the brutally materialistic twentieth century. Yet, as *Apparition Poems* suggests, if a new America is to manifest in the twenty-first century, it might as well begin in Philadelphia. If the epic focuses on loss followed by more loss, rather than eventual, fulsome triumph, then so be it. And if *Apparition Poems* as fragmentary epic imposes a lesson, it is this— the pursuit of singularity in human life is a fool’s game; the truth is almost always, and triumphantly, multiple.

Preface: Quiddities

Ezra Pound famously remarked that when poetry strays too far from music, it ceases to be poetry. I would like to opine, as a tangent thought to his, that when the higher arts stray too far from philosophy, they cease to be the higher arts. Philosophy, no less than literature, is a series of narratives; and that higher-end, intellectually ambitious literature should twirl and torque meaningfully around philosophical quandaries and discourses is something that English-language poetry has forgotten in the last half-century (and I mean “pure” philosophy, as differentiated from literary theory or aesthetics). The leveling process by which no distinctions between high and low art are made, as a precondition to post-modernity’s preponderance, has effaced interest in the “fundamental questions” in favor of narrow, nihilistic ironies and corrosive but intellectually superficial cultural critiques. But that, without reprising Romanticism, English language poetry can reclaim interest in pure philosophy and the crux questions of human existence, is the assumption these poems make. As such, they are angled against everything in the English language oeuvre after T.S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets,” including the array of Deconstructive, non-narrative poetics, which confuse the respective (though not completely antithetical) functions of philosophy and poetry in an excessive and demeaning alienation of the aesthetic.

How my approach differs from Eliot's is this— rather than compressing the sensory data relevant to his inquiry into succinct forms, he prefers to paint on a wide canvas. The sharp points of his piece, often expressed in axioms and aphorisms, suffer a dissipated sense of being too generalized; an intermittent chiasmus with the tactile is represented, but focus is all too often lost in digression and imprecisely motivated meanderings. Many of Eliot's axioms are, in fact, quotations (from, among others, Heraclitus and St. John of the Cross); and his Modernistic allusiveness chips away at the potential philosopher's stone of original cognition for him. The poems in "Quiddities" are compressed and formed in the manner of John Keats' Odes; not, of course, that the poems are odes, just that they are meant to convey mystery-in-brevity; and a sense, however sodden with disillusionment and despair, of enchantment. For enchantment in intellectual mystery, where English language verse is concerned, few poems but these Apparition Poems after the English Romantics will suffice. Modernism and post-modernism presented many shortcuts to a sense of engaged cognition; but the full enchantment of the depths and mysteries of the human mind and its powers of perception and discernment was not perceived or represented. Impulses which could have led to these representations were deemed too earnest, in a milieu and context which prized irony, and mistrust of any form of depth, especially subjectively maintained cognitive-affective depth, with or against impulses which could be deemed Romantic.

If Quiddities is not merely a reprise of Romantic impulses, it is because the mysteries the poems encompass and close on are not comforting. Wordsworth's conception of intellectual enchantment is positivist; he follows a pedagogical path to teach us, with a discrete, didactic, and circumscribed system, how to think. This is the thematic backbone of "The Prelude," his masterpiece. Intellectual man, he informs us, can always fall back on Nature; and Nature has the capacity to endlessly replenish intellectual man. The other major Romantics offer more naïve versions of the same intermittently comforting premise; even if Byron and Keats have ways of building levels of permanent encroaching darkness into their visions, too. The intellectual enchantment in Quiddities ends in itself; the poems offer no system as a transcendental antidote, and nothing is endlessly replenishing in the poems except the endless montage of thought (thoughts on more thoughts). The enchantment offered by Quiddities is strange and (in a contradictory way) bitter; cognition has no recourse but to recur endlessly, in a sensory landscape as blasted and dystopic as the poems themselves. To circle back to Eliot again, where Quiddities is concerned; it is cognition over the (or a) waste land. But that the human intellect can and should develop its own kind of narcissism, over the dictatorial narcissism of the senses, especially in America, is presupposed. The human mind is the only enchanted place with any genuine permanence for mankind; that is the key and primordial supposition here.

Reap Together

As to how I have designated possible discussions/discourses about Apparition Poems; applying the moniker *noir* to them, in order to explicate the aesthetic terrain they inhabit; I would like to designate a possible chiasmus between "noir," as defined in textual practice by me, and the theoretical underpinnings of English Romanticism. What noir and Romanticism share is substantial— a sense of mysticism or enchantment in/with cognition itself, or cognitive processes; also, the engagement-in-cognition between textuality and the human mind, and the mind's enchantment with levels of textual transparency and opacity, back and forth; and a generalized sense of the necessity of dealing directly, to a greater or lesser extent, with philosophy and philosophical issues in texts maintaining artistic/aesthetic consonance. In order to develop this discourse, I would

like to parse *The Solitary Reaper* by William Wordsworth, in a dialectical fusion with *Apparition Poem #1070*. The issues of phallocentrism-in-text, imposition on the feminine, “theft” of the feminine, rusticity, chastity, and sincerity starkly given antithesis by urbanity, sensuality, and artifice, fused into meditations on textual innocence and experience, virginity and consummation, and ultimate female empowerment in noir over Romanticism, are the ones which will lead us, hopefully, to a fulfilled dialectic.

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?—
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending;—
I listened, motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

I said, “I can’t
even remember
the last time I
was excited, how
can I associate

ideas?”

She pulled
out a gun, a tube
of oil, and an air
cushion,

and it was
a spontaneous
overflow,

powerfully
felt, in which we
reaped together—

To clarify: “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” is a famous phrase from Wordsworth’s Preface. If the two poems together initiate a sort of wrestling match or scuffle, it is because inversions in the two texts lead to a kind of thematic impasse. When Wordsworth (or his protagonist/”I”) co-opts the song of the Solitary Reaper, the interaction is a kind of unconsummated (“chaste”) one— she does not know someone is listening, and Wordsworth seems eager to keep it that way. We are drawn in by her rusticity, the sense that (as Wordsworth would have us believe, and as he explicated in his Preface) the rustic evinces a superior purity/innocence to the urban, and the plaintive quality of her song advertises a kind of emotional grandeur or gravitas, a superior depth to her femininity.

The woman in #1080 is our antithesis. Because what is being presented to the reader would seem to encompass levels of sleaze (“gun, tube of oil, air cushion”), it is easy to miss that this protagonist is proud that he does not have to surreptitiously co-opt something (song or skin) from his heroine; the sense that she, out of her own urbanity, anticipates the need for a full consummation, or modicum of experience. Also important is that she initiates the action; whether we find it sleazy or not, she is in a more empowered position *vis a vis* the male than Wordsworth would ever allow himself to be. This form of female empowerment is threaded again, as a motif, through Equations, released a year after Apparition Poems. And is, ultimately, what a noir sensibility has over Romantic sincerity, which tends towards chastity: the fully realized, mature notice and transubstantiation into text of the adult, and adult levels of awareness, both of the body (in noir, an experienced body) and of levels of metaphoric awareness which Wordsworth would not have missed (that each realization of the feminine is a realization of a certain kind of text, textuality, and textual practice, bound together by processes of incision and receptivity conjoined in a single writerly consciousness, male or female).

By having me raise a “plaintive” voice to my Muse, as I drolly invert another line from Wordsworth’s Preface (“as to the way the mind associates ideas in a state of excitement”), I feminize myself so that my compatriot may incise into me her own experience, or equation, of the situation at hand. Thus, the sleaze levels are superficial; my text empowers a sensualized, adult woman to enjoy (“reap together”) an encounter both more tactile and more textually fulfilling than the encounters both in Lyrical Ballads and in Wordsworth’s Prelude, which features, on a general level, few interactions at all, and remains mired in Romanticism’s narcissistic obsession with the phallogocentric text, and with male assertions.

The Arbitrary and the Artful

That language, used to create musical effects in poetry, is not arbitrary; does, in fact, depend on meaningful or artful arrangement to establish and consolidate its effects; chafes against the confines of Deconstructionist discourse. The Deconstructionist commonplace, derived from Saussure— that linguistic signifiers are arbitrary (and this dictum is usually presented as iron-clad)— does not deal adequately with either the musical potentialities of language, or how they have already manifested significantly in the lyrical poems produced both by French Symbolism and English Romanticism. Deconstructionism is notoriously soft on dealing with poetry in general— key texts like Roland Barthes *The Pleasures of the Text* lean heavily on fiction, as Barthes deals (for example) with Proust and Robbe-Grillet rather than Baudelaire. Poetry, especially lyrical poetry, is a direct threat to the sanctioned discourses of Deconstructionism— as a tactile, manifest testament to not-arbitrary language (which advertises, in both its intentions and its effects, its own artfulness and non-arbitrary quality), created by individuals, often to make metaphysical inquiries, and to induce sensual, visceral cognitive pleasure and enchantment simultaneously.

Lyrical poetry signifies a set of imperatives or complexes— aesthetic interests which, when fulfilled, can appear serendipitous without stumbling into the disarray of the random; and, the more exquisite the verbal music produced, the less random it seems. The materiality of this kind of text (be it Keats or Baudelaire) has its own meaning and purpose indigenous to it; it is self-sustaining and self-justifying, and manifests its purpose in its own material subsistence. Deconstructionists would, if they could, disavow lyricism; however, to disavow lyricism is to disavow all music; to discard Keats and Baudelaire would be to discard Bach and Beethoven, as well. Music can be justified qua music or qua language. Roland Barthes leaning heavily on fiction is suspect— both because fiction reinforces master narratives (of cohesiveness, of reality) of human life which may be false, and because novelistic language does not have the hinge to being *irreplaceable, singular, individual* which accomplished lyricism does. Unless Deconstructionism in the twenty-first century can develop a discursive chiasmus with poetry and the lyrical, there will remain suspicions that the motivations of/for Deconstructionist discourse are destructive, rather than creative ones; and that the Deconstructionist elevation of fiction over poetry has in it the contradiction of willful ignorance of musical language (*melopoeia*) which, in both its motivations and its effects, is not arbitrary. It is another frightening realization of an alignment between Deconstructionism and post-modernity— an alignment based, metaphorically speaking, on killing.

